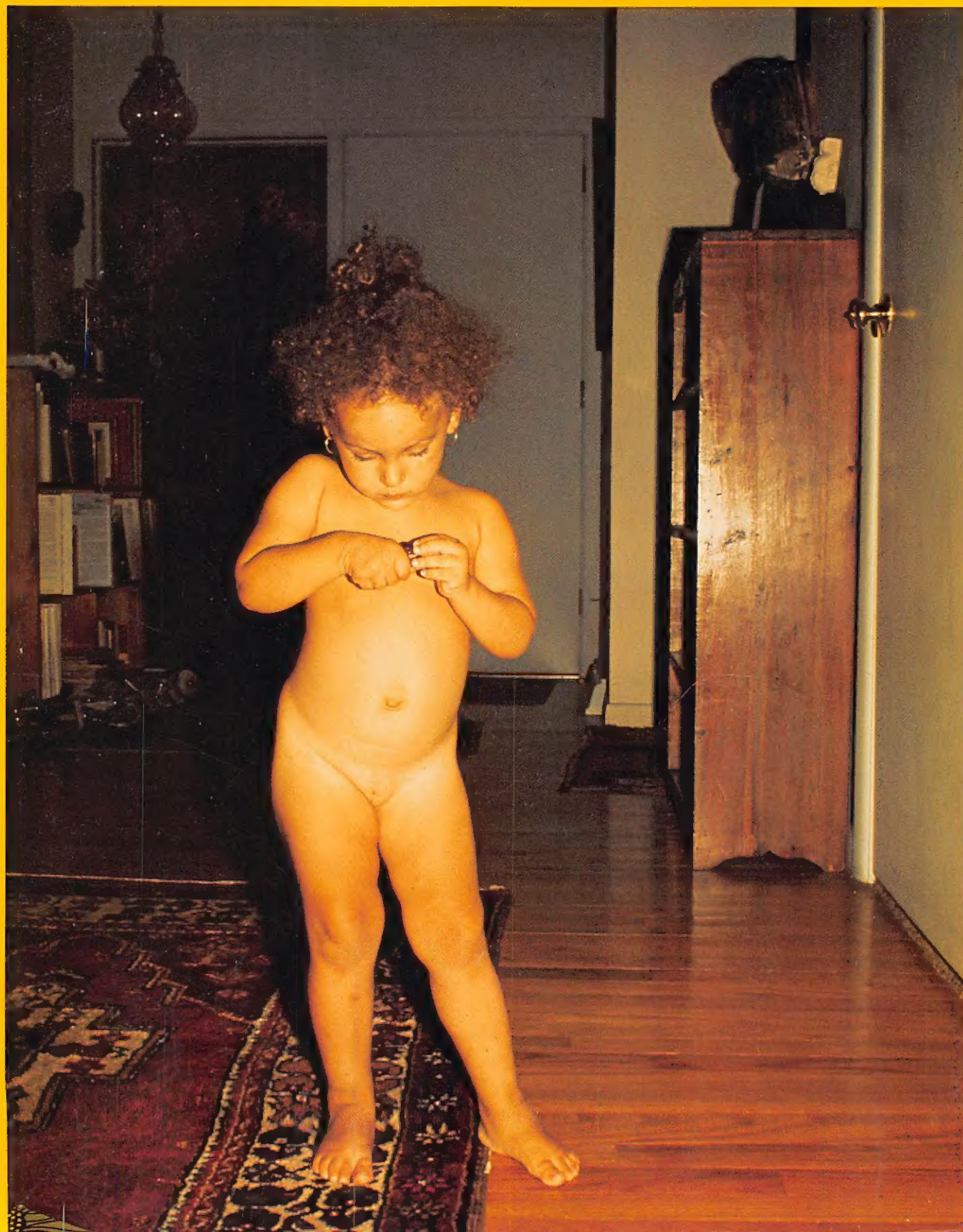


WALTER KAUFMANN

WHAT IS MAN?



Chicago. 1939



WHAT IS MAN?

Books by Walter Kaufmann

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(*The Birth of Tragedy, Beyond Good and Evil,
On the Genealogy of Morals, The Case of Wagner, Ecce Homo*)
THE WILL TO POWER
THE GAY SCIENCE

Chicago. 1939





Central Java. 1975

WHAT IS MAN?

Photographs and Text
by
WALTER KAUFMANN



Williamstown. 1944

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New Guinea highlands. 1974

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EDITH KAUFMANN
1887-1977



Chicago. 1944



Princeton. 1947







Chicago. 1939



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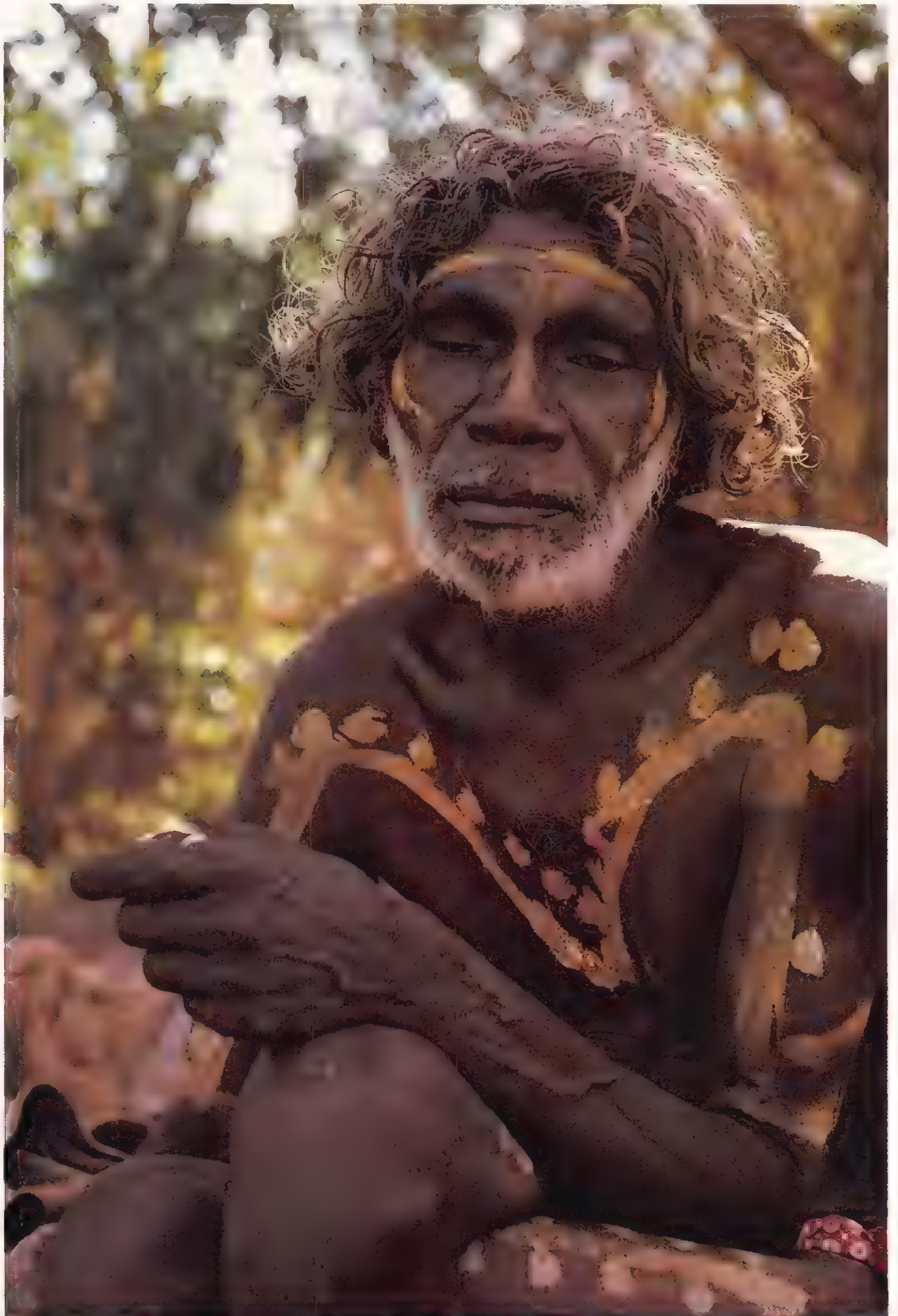




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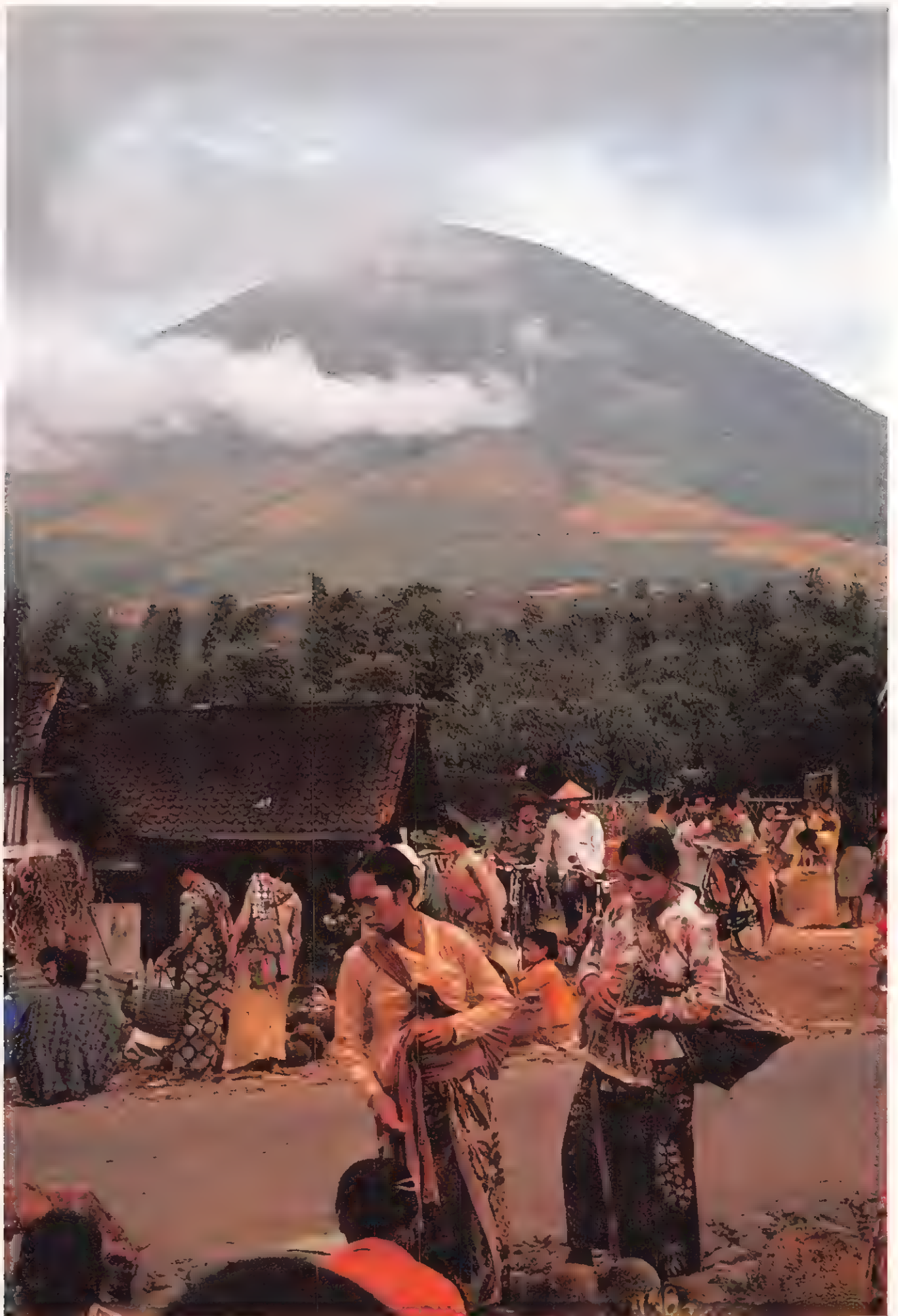
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I

THE QUESTION

1

What is man? The question comes from the Bible, and Kant said that all of philosophy could be reduced to it. Yet no philosopher nor anyone else seems to have given an adequate answer.

Martin Buber began his rather disappointing book *The Problem of Man* by relating that Rabbi Bunam, one of the last great teachers of Hasidism, once said to his disciples: "I have wanted to write a book that was to be called *Adam*, and the whole of man was supposed to be in it. But then I decided not to write this book." For many years Mark Twain worked on a book with the title *What Is Man?* but never published it. Clearly, what these men were after was not a new definition to replace Aristotle's *zoon logon echon*, the living being that has *logos*, which means reason or rational speech. Only Rabbi Bunam wanted "the whole of man" to be in his book, but the others also were looking for answers that would not be trivial.

In the Bible, the question, What is man? occurs twice: In the Eighth Psalm, which is widely known, and in Job, in a passage which need not fear comparison with it, though it is rarely recalled. We do not know which was written first. The words are the same in both places: "*Mah enosh?* *Enosh*, like the startlingly similar *Mensch* in Kant's question and in the German title of Buber's book, means the human being—female as well as male, and children, too. It is in this sense that we renew the ancient question here.

Eighth Psalm

Lord, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth
 as your glory is chanted to the heavens
 out of the mouths of babes and infants . . .
 When I look at your heavens,
 the work of your hands,
 the moon and the stars
 which you have established:
what is man
 that you are mindful of him
 and the son of man
 that you care for him?
 You have made him little less than God
 and crowned him with glory and honor.
 You have given him dominion
 over the works of your hands,
 you have put all things under his feet,
 all sheep and oxen
 and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air
 and the fish of the sea;
 he traverses the sea.
 Lord, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Job 7

When I lie down I say: When shall I arise?
 Can one measure the night?
 I grow tired tossing till dawn.
 My flesh is already covered with worms,
 my skin, hard with dirt, loses its form.
 My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle
 and come to their end, hopeless.
 Remember, my life is but wind,
 my eye will never again see good,
 eyes looking for me behold me no more.
 Your eyes are upon me, but I am gone.
 As a cloud fades and vanishes,
 one who goes down to Sheol does not come up,
 returns no more to his house,
 nor does his place know him anymore.

I will not restrain my mouth,
 I will speak the anguish of my spirit,
 I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.
 Am I the sea or a monster
 that you set a guard over me?
 When I say, My bed will comfort me,
 My couch will ease my complaint,
 you scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions.
 I choose strangling and death rather than my bones.
 I loathe my life,

I would not live for ever.
 Leave me alone!
 My days are a breath.
What is man
 that you make so much of him
 and set your heart upon him,
 visit him every morning
 and test him every moment?
 How long will you not look away from me
 nor let me alone till I swallow my spit?
 If I sin,
 what do I do to you,
 watcher of men?
 Why have you made me your mark?
 Why have I become a burden to you?
 Why do you not pardon my transgression
 and take away my iniquity?
 I shall lie in the earth,
 you will seek me,
 but I shall not be.

Kant

The field of philosophy in this cosmopolitan sense can be reduced to the following questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What should I do?
3. What may I hope?
4. *What is man?*

The first question is answered by metaphysics, the second by ethics, the third by religion, and the fourth by anthropology. At bottom, however, one could include all of this in anthropology because the first three questions relate to the last one.

Immanuel Kant, *Logik* (1800), Introduction, Part 3

On the face of it, Job's question and the Psalmist's could scarcely be more different. But reading Kant or almost any other philosopher, we realize how much Job and the Psalmist have in common: a poetic soul, a rhetorical style, and the crucial presuppositions that give rise to their question.

Job and the Psalmist are like two Jews who take it for granted that they are members of the chosen people. One of them feels overwhelmed by gratitude and gives praise to God; the other protests that enough is enough, and asks God why he does not leave us alone. Both Job and the Psalmist assume that God has chosen man—the human race—and assigned us a special position in his world, somewhere between the eternal God who created heaven and earth, and all other animals. Although Kant's tone is unpoetic and dry and often extremely pedantic, he still shared this ancient conceit which has been a central feature of almost all Western thought. "Conceit" means both a fanciful idea or strained metaphor and an excessively high opinion of one's own worth or importance, and it is possible that both meanings are in order here.

Job and the Psalmist wonder why God, whose power is so vastly greater than ours, should take such a pronounced interest in man, instead of simply considering man as just another animal. That there is a God who created heaven and earth and takes a tremendous—Job thinks, excessive—interest in us, they both do not doubt.

Within this unquestioned framework, the author of Job displays a far more independent mind than most philosophers and theologians who have written about his work. It is one of the premises of the Book of Job, agreed to by God himself in the book, that Job has not sinned. Much less has he sinned more than others—than his friends, for example, who keep insisting that his unique tribulations are proof of unique transgressions. But Job says: Even if I had sinned, that would not justify God's behavior. Why, even in that case, would he "not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?"

What is man? The kind of being who, confronted with both Psalms and Job, fondly remembers the Eighth Psalm but forgets the seventh chapter of Job, even when he writes about Job at length. But the author of Job's cry was also a human being.

What is man? The kind of being who develops the faith that an almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, made him the crown of the whole of creation—and who can then lose this faith, while retaining his vanity. It is at least arguable that Kant is a case in point; in any case, hundreds of millions of other men are.

One can learn something from views of man that are not based on solid evidence and arguments, if only about those who held or hold these views. What is man? Even bad answers tell us something about man.

II

HOW CAN THE QUESTION BE ANSWERED?

2

In the Bible the question, What is man? is rhetorical and not meant to be answered. A crisp retort, like "a featherless biped" or "a rational animal," would be as inappropriate in the Eighth Psalm or in Job as a more elaborate conception or theory. That is almost equally true of the present context, which is defined by hundreds of visual images. Man is a featherless biped, and he is an animal capable of rational speech, and he is an animal who uses symbols and is capable of constructing works of art. But a text that would eventually come to a conclusion of that sort would not suit the pictures any better than it would Job's cry.

What is man? is an invitation to reflection on man's lot. A painstaking defense of a single theory would hardly go better with the pictures than an examination of several crisp definitions that in the end came down in favor of one of them as a little better than some of the others. We should not stuff Job's mouth with the dry crumbs of a few abstractions, crying "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace. The question, What is man? permits of no final or adequate answer, and we should not pretend that it does.

Even if what has just been said seems right intuitively, it is worth asking whether we can give any reasons why it is so. A passing remark about punishment in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (II.13) offers a reason: "Only that which has no history is definable."

What Nietzsche had in mind was that in the case of punishment, for example, we must distinguish the procedure and the purpose; that the procedure is older; and that through history different purposes have been "projected and interpreted into the procedure." It is therefore a mistake to assume that the procedure was "invented for the purpose of punishing, just as one formerly thought of the hand as invented for the purpose of grasping."

Of course, one could argue against Nietzsche that punishment *can* be defined, and that man, who has a history, can be defined, too—for example, as a featherless biped. Against this objection, however, it might be maintained that what remains constant and can be included in the definition is relatively trivial, while the essence or meaning changes and therefore eludes definition.

In the case of punishment Nietzsche may actually have been wrong. Punishment could be said to involve at least two persons (call them A and B) and two acts. A holds a position of authority in relation to B, claims that B has done some wrong, and by virtue of his authority causes something unpleasant to happen to B in return for (as a punishment for) this claimed wrong. I have argued elsewhere* that this is what is meant by punishment, but that punishment cannot be reduced to a single purpose. In fact, I distinguished ten possible purposes. While it would be a mistake to include one of these purposes, such as retribution, in the definition of punishment, it is arguable that a definition of the procedure, which has a distinctive structure, is illuminating and helpful. If so, some things that have a history *are* definable.

What of man? More than half a century after the publication of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, Ortega y Gasset suggested that "*man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is—history. Expressed differently: what nature is to things, history, *res gestae*, is to man.*" Ortega's argument in *Historia como sistema* (1941)** is rather loose and very similar to contentions found a little later in Sartre's writings. Man is, according to Ortega, "unique in the universe" by being "an entity whose being consists not in what it is already, but in what it is not yet, a being that consists in not-yet-being. Everything else in the world is what it is." Man is always confronted by "divers possibilities: I can do this or that." "Man is the entity that makes itself . . . But man must not

* *Without Guilt and Justice*, section 17.

** *History as a System*, pp. 111–13, 201–203, and 215–17; reprinted in Kaufmann, *Existentialism* (1975 edition), pp. 152–57, with some discussion of Ortega's relation to Sartre and Heidegger.

only make himself: the weightiest thing he has to do is to determine *what* he is going to be." "I must choose. Hence, I am free. But, be it well understood, I am free *by compulsion*, whether I wish to be or not." Sartre's reformulation has become world famous: "condemned to be free."

From these assertions Ortega moves on to say:

Man is what has happened to him, what he has done. Other things might have happened to him or have been done by him, but what did in fact happen to him and was done by him, this constitutes a relentless trajectory of experiences that he carries on his back as the vagabond his bundle of all he possesses.

And Ortega concludes that man has no nature but instead has a history.

There is no need here to trace Ortega's debts to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Wilhelm Dilthey. But it is noteworthy that the wholly unsubstantiated claim that man is "unique in the universe" insofar as he is free comes from Kant. In fact, we do not know enough about the universe to say what, if anything, sets man apart from all other beings. The crux of Ortega's argument is that if it is man's nature to be free and he makes himself what he is, then what he has made himself at any one moment does not define him, because he may choose to change himself.

Similar ideas could be found in many other writers, for example in one of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (II.12):

Choose to be changed. Oh experience the rapture of fire
in which a life is concealed, exulting in change as it burns;
and the projecting spirit who is master of the entire
earth loves the figure's flight less than the point where it turns.

Ortega's claims about human freedom, not to speak of his contention that man is "unique in the universe," are not needed to support his conclusion. What matters is that man changes, that his very nature changes, and that man therefore cannot be identified with what happens to be human nature at any particular stage in his history; he is his whole history.

Owing to their roots in German philosophy, and specifically in Kant and Hegel, Ortega and Sartre clothed this insight in dubious metaphysical contentions. The central point, however, can be grasped readily enough when we think, say, of Germany. What is Germany? If we define the country in terms of the realities of any particular year, the definition will not fit any number of other periods. Germany is—her history.

As they got involved in metaphysics, Ortega and Sartre actually contradicted themselves. They claimed, in effect, that it is man's nature or essence to be free, that man cannot help being free, and that man, like Hegel's "spirit," makes himself; but at the same time they denied that man has any nature or essence.

To summarize, the philosophers cited here have overstated their case, and we cannot agree with them. But they call attention to the fact that definitions of man cannot amount to much. Definitions may be accurate as far as they go, but if we really want to know what man is, we must study his history.

The trouble with this conclusion is that while "a featherless biped" or "a mammal that laughs" is too short, the history of man is too long. If we must know all that man ever did before we can answer the question, What is man? then the question is clearly unanswerable. Even if we never did anything else but study history, man's life is not long enough to study more than a tiny fraction of all man did. What, then, can we do?

Suppose our problem were much simpler and we wished to know an individual human being. Clearly, a definition would accomplish little, except perhaps to identify the person we wanted to know. Chemistry and other natural sciences would not get us much further, though it might be mildly interesting to analyze the blood chemistry, as well as the blood pressure, the pulse, and other such data. The fingerprints might serve to distinguish the individual from all other human beings, and yet we should have to say, after we had gained all of this information, that we did not *know* the individual.

Now suppose further that the person in question is dead. Let us say that it is Eleanor Roosevelt, and we are shown a photograph of her as a teenager. Obviously, we would know her much better if we also saw pictures of her that showed her as a little girl, as a young woman, as the First Lady of the United States, and as a widow. We should know her still better if we knew

what she did and thought, what she wrote and said. The obvious way to gain such knowledge would be to read a biography or, if no good biography were available, to do the research required for writing one. How much research we would choose to do, or how long a biography we would read if there were several, that would depend in large measure on the amount of time we wished to give to this project. Still, the longer study is not necessarily the better one. It might contain vast amounts of trivial information, while a shorter book might offer a good selection of some of the highlights of her career. No study can offer more than a selection, and the best one can hope to get is a discriminating selection that proves to be illuminating. Precisely the same considerations apply to the question, What is man?

3

Many people would rather dispense with history. Let the dead bury the dead! But we cannot adopt that attitude if we wish to gain a better understanding of what man is. Making do with knowledge of our contemporaries is like knowing Eleanor Roosevelt only at seventy-five and not caring what she did, felt, and thought during most of her life. Such knowledge is bound to be superficial.

Some social scientists think that there is a shortcut that allows them to bypass history. They think that one can simply ask the living about what one would like to know. An informant, they think, can tell us about his own past and also about the past of his people and his religion. Yet most people have very little knowledge of such matters, and whatever knowledge they may claim to have is usually quite unreliable. The images we build up of our past are crucial components of our self-images, and if one looks up old documents and letters—if, in other words, one does not bypass history—one discovers how partial and misleading our memories were.

Regarding the past of their religion and the development of the customs that define much of their life, most people are ignorant even in the most sophisticated Western countries in which history is taught in school. Asking questions of a few people is no adequate substitute for historical studies. And the notion that one can dispense with both history and interviews because it is more efficient to send out questionnaires and compute the replies is laughable. Why do so many men in some societies wear hats? or neckties? Or why do they have such and such religious beliefs? In reply some writers invoke deep psychological needs, while others ask people or send out questionnaires. Yet the answer is obvious. Men who wear hats or neckties or share widely held beliefs usually do these things because other men do them. Any other reasons they produce are almost sure to be rationalizations. People may say that they wear this or that because it looks beautiful or because one would catch cold without it; but when fashion changes, most people will change what they wear and what they believe. Thus the first attempt to bypass history comes to grief.

In the twentieth century some philosophers have proposed another alternative to the historical approach. The so-called phenomenologists called for a direct intuition of essences. Next to the founder, Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler was the leading light of this school, and he tried to extend this new approach to phenomena that would increase our knowledge of man. In 1915, when he was still a full-fledged exponent of phenomenology, he published an essay, "On the Phenomenon of the Tragic," in which he dispensed with all historical analysis of tragedy as well as previous theories about the tragic—and ended up by restating dogmatically some of the things he had read in Hegel and Nietzsche, whom he forgot to mention. This would have mattered less if the claims he reiterated had not been demonstrably wrong.*

The point of considering the ideas of earlier writers is not that what is old is necessarily true. Rather, we should not be bewitched by the first half-way plausible idea that comes to us. Quite often, we are half remembering something heard or read somewhere. Even when that is not the case, it often happens that the same idea was presented earlier by someone else—and then refuted. Of course, it can be a crippling compulsion to keep checking whether something may not perhaps have been said by someone else. The phenomenologists' summons to look at the phenomena instead of getting stuck in the webs of old concepts and theories may well have been overdue in Germany, where Nietzsche had complained as early as 1874 about the "hypertrophy of the historical sense."** If only one considers Husserl's historical context, one can see

* For a detailed discussion see Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1968), sections 59f.

** *Of the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*, section 1.

why he wanted to turn philosophy into a strict science by ignoring history and concentrating on what we experience plainly. Yet, for all its sophistication and extraordinary pedantry, the phenomenological movement was also extremely naive and never led to any great harvest of new scientific results. And Scheler's later attempt to found a new science of "philosophical anthropology" was stillborn.

His last book, "Man's Position in the Cosmos," appeared in 1928, the year he died. The son of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father, he had converted to Catholicism in his thirties, and had converted others to his new faith before he abandoned it again soon after. In his last book he still took for granted man's unique position in the cosmos, or as he called it in German, man's *Sonderstellung*. This was plainly a survival from the religions he had once held, and not the result of an immediate intuition of man's essence. For in fact we do not know enough about the cosmos to be sure whether man's position in it is unique. Our earth is not the cosmos, but merely one small planet in one solar system in one galaxy.

Only science can tell us a little more about other solar systems and remote galaxies, but it seems highly unlikely that it will ever tell us enough for us to be sure about *all* kinds of beings everywhere. Meanwhile, comparative historical studies can show us what distinctive assumptions we have accepted in our culture from the ancient Hebrews or Greeks, and what alternative views of man have developed elsewhere.

Science is always in danger of becoming dogmatic. It depends on collaboration within a broad consensus. One shares assumptions about what is the case and what are the proper methods of research. Those who question or strongly oppose this essential consensus are either ignored or, if they attract too much attention to make that feasible, ridiculed. And the followers of an outsider often are no less intolerant. They also elevate their consensus into a dogma.

History, very much including history of science, raises questions about dogmas. We gain some distance and learn to see views in many perspectives, and we also become aware of alternatives. Instead of mistaking Michelangelo's "Moses" or his "Last Judgment" for timeless revelations of what Moses looked like or of what awaits us at such and such a time, we see them as the creations of a supreme artist in sixteenth-century Italy. A van Gogh landscape tells us something about the painter at that particular time. And Scheler's book, though hardly very informative about "man's position in the cosmos," tells us something about a minor German philosopher and the state of German philosophy in the late nineteen-twenties.

No lightning flash shows us the truth all at once, but through painstaking historical studies one slowly gains some knowledge of what man is. This may be disappointing for those who desire a shortcut—tourists who want to reach their goals quickly and sleep on the way. But some people do not mind walking, swimming, and climbing mountains. And to answer the question, What is man? we must travel through time.

"What man is, is his deed, is the series of his deeds," said Hegel in his introductory lectures on the philosophy of history. Many people associate this view with existentialism; for Jean-Paul Sartre, initially very much influenced by Husserl and phenomenology, revived Hegel's point in his famous lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism." But Hegel understood far better than Sartre, not to speak of other existentialists, that man's deeds comprise history, and by no means only political history, which is usually taught as a tale of wars and empires, conquests and dynasties. Some of the most distinctive manifestations of humanity are to be found in music, art, and literature, in philosophy and religion; and any study of man that neglects these realms comes nowhere near telling us what man is.

4

It is man who asks, What is man? What he wants is self-knowledge. While the ancient Hebrews put the question, it was the Greeks who said: Know Thyself! Socrates and Plato were fond of quoting the words inscribed at Apollo's temple in Delphi: Know Thyself. And around 500 before our era Heraclitus said: I sought myself. Yet no Greek philosopher seems to have known himself especially well. They had no idea how to attain self-knowledge.

It remained for Sophocles to transfigure this theme by writing a tragedy about Oedipus, who was the wisest of men but did not know himself—did not know who he was, because he did not know his history. As he discovers his history, he attains self-knowledge, but that does not turn

out to be as much of a triumph or a source of good cheer as some of the philosophers had taken for granted. Self-knowledge destroys his opinion of himself, his conceit, his assumptions, the world that he had constructed for himself.

Hegel conceived of historical knowledge, including the history of art, religion, and philosophy, as self-knowledge, and contributed much to our knowledge of man. Under his influence, German scholars explored these fields as they had never been studied before, and advanced our knowledge of man. Yet Hegel did not know himself well at all. He thought he was what he was not, and did not know what he was. His ninety-three-page preface to his first book is a case in point. Having completed a wildly unrigorous book, full of self-indulgent digressions and obscurities, he declared in the preface that it was his aim to elevate philosophy to the rank of a science by making it rigorous and systematic. He never seems to have understood the bent of his own mind or the conflicts that tormented him.

Freud discovered a way to self-knowledge. We must study our history, using dreams and memories, deeds and misdeeds, thoughts and feelings, as a historian uses documents: taking nothing at face value, but learning how to interpret such materials. One could say that he founded a new branch of humanistic studies: humanistic psychology. That label, to be sure, has been used by a faction of post-Freudians, and if it makes for confusion we can dispense with it. The point is that Freud made psychology suitable for the attainment of self-knowledge by bringing to it methods developed in the humanities.

Even so, psychoanalysis is very far from holding the only key to self-knowledge. Through the study of art and music, literature and history, philosophy and religion, we discover our own humanity, our own potentialities. As we read *Hamlet* or *Crime and Punishment*, or expose ourselves to van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo, our conception of ourselves is changed. Encounters with Socrates or the Buddha, Mozart or Napoleon, also change our self-understanding.

Some philosophers have puzzled over the problem of our knowledge of other minds, without noticing either how much literature contributes to such knowledge, or how the knowledge of other minds precedes our knowledge of ourselves. Consciousness precedes self-consciousness, and we become aware of the deeds and behavior of others before we become aware of our own. A mother's love is experienced before one has ever loved. Literature increases our self-awareness and self-understanding and leads us to distinguish between thoughts and feelings that we had never sorted out.

Of course, the humanities are rarely taught this way, but for that very reason self-knowledge and the understanding of what man is are not very widespread. Whoever wants to know himself and man cannot take a shortcut and avoid the humanities. Freud, whose interest in literature, religion, art, and archaeology was very deep, might well have agreed.

5

If we take the long way through the past, the danger is great that we never reach our goal. Most scholars get lost on the way. One could almost define a scholar as one who gets lost on the way because so many details absorb his attention that he forgets humanity and himself.

Humanistic studies are no panacea. Those pursuing them are as apt as anyone else to end up with trivia. On the other hand, they may gain knowledge of the dead as well as knowledge that man has done this and that—and practical knowledge as well. It is widely assumed that the humanities yield no knowledge of how to do things. We think of "know-how" as a skill or aptitude that is acquired by *doing* something, and not by the kind of study associated with the humanities. This is true enough of swimming or riding a bicycle. But the knowledge of how to compose a quartet or a symphony is acquired by studying music written by one's predecessors; and the way to learn to write poems, plays, novels, or philosophy, or to paint or sculpt is to study the works of past masters.

Some might object that one could make do with a living teacher. Yet all of the great masters began in a tradition, and if one wants to learn how to paint, sculpt, or write in the sense in which they did these things, there is once again no shortcut. Such knowledge is available only through humanistic studies.

"The sense in which they did these things" requires explanation. People who have never studied philosophy sometimes pass off their opinions as their "philosophy." This kind of un-

disciplined self-expression needs to be clearly distinguished from philosophy in the sense in which the great masters pursued it. The same point applies to painting, sculpture, and music.

Some people think of creative artists and poets, composers and novelists, as untutored people of genius who never studied the works of their predecessors and would not have profited from such study in any case. But that is a myth. One might call it the myth of the artist or, to cite the title of a relevant German book by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, the legend of the artist.

The requisite knowledge, of course, need not be acquired at colleges or universities, and it is worth asking whether the virtual monopoly that such institutions have gained as centers of learning is not pernicious. Certainly, courses in "creative writing" are very dubious; no great poet, playwright, or novelist has ever emerged from such a course. But then such courses hold out the promise of shortcuts: Make do with a living teacher and dispense with the past!

Ben Shahn, a painter and graphic artist who was anything but a traditionalist, sometimes said that the best thing about a certain art school housed in a great museum was that the students were forced to walk past a large number of excellent paintings on their way to and from class. Once again, the way through the past involves the danger that some people never reach the goal because they get lost somewhere.

The argument we have just followed may seem to show only that a painter must study past painters, a novelist past novelists, and a philosopher past philosophers. Yet most of the greatest masters had a wide knowledge of the humanities that was by no means limited to the predecessors in their own field. All of the greatest philosophers are cases in point no less than Michelangelo and Leonardo, Dante and Goethe, the Greek tragic poets, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. And sometimes we learn more from people outside our craft than from those within it.

6

Historical knowledge has turned out to be far more interesting than is usually taken for granted. It comes to much more than information that one or another event occurred a long time ago. It also involves knowing fascinating men and women, self-knowledge, and learning how to do various things. But this is not all. Anyone who knows only contemporary materials has no way of telling passing fads and fashions from works with staying power that have lasting value. He lacks perspective and assumes that what is closest to him in time is also greatest; yet, as it recedes in time, it is dwarfed by what is more recent. In brief, he lacks taste.

Taste, some people think, is purely subjective, and one person's taste is as good as another's. You like this, they say, and I like that; to *their* minds, Jasper Johns is as good as Rembrandt, and Franz von Stuck as good as Vincent van Gogh. These last two comparisons are extreme, of course, and anyone going that far might well be conceded to lack taste—except by people who have an axe to grind and realize that once they admit that such judgments would be outrageous, their case is lost. Still, confronted with their own contemporaries, many people are led to think that what is close by is great; and the less they know about the field, the more helpless are they when comparing two or more contemporaries.

Hitler loved and admired Franz von Stuck, while he abominated van Gogh and his influence. This tells us a great deal about Hitler's lack of taste, his values, and his view of man, even if we keep in mind that Hitler was born in 1889, and that Franz von Stuck lived from 1863 to 1928, von Gogh from 1853 to 1890. In Hitler's time many Germans shared his lack of taste. Now that von Stuck and van Gogh are more nearly equidistant from us, few people if any would still make that particular judgment, even if some should prefer a painter living *now* to Vincent van Gogh.

Shaw and some of his contemporaries may really have thought that he was greater than Shakespeare; nobody now seems to think so, though Shaw was very good indeed compared to most playwrights since Ibsen. Nietzsche's contemporaries did not think of him as the greatest living German philosopher; but more than a hundred years after the publication of his first book most people now would reply, if asked whether he was the greatest: Who else was there? Almost all of the others, however large they loomed at the time, have long dropped out of sight.

Time is not only an artist but also a merciless critic who points up faults that at first went unnoticed. Some works become more beautiful, and continued study enhances them; others become ridiculous or boring. Strictly speaking, of course, time does not pass any judgments; she

does not even show anything. But she makes it much easier to see what most people failed to notice at close range.

Asked why one prefers this to that, one does not have to say: I simply like this better. One can try to show what one admires in the writers or artists, philosophers or composers whom one considers superior. One can call attention to what others may have overlooked—details, relationships, meanings, ambiguities, inconsistencies, similarities to somewhat earlier works that did much the same thing but much more, or much less, effectively. Judgments of taste can rest on intensive study and the ability to compare a work with scores of others that a neophyte is not aware of.

It is one of the joys of work in the humanities that one can challenge a widely accepted judgment and that one can champion a work, or even a whole body of work, that has not been appreciated sufficiently. When one succeeds in making others see what they had not seen before, one may even carry the day. Often one can point to the fact that an artist or a work has been acclaimed by generations of informed and sensitive critics and that this creates some presumption of richness. The point depends on their being informed and sensitive, but even then we are free to differ with them if we can show what they overlooked.

7

There is a famous passage in Matthew Arnold's influential essay, "The Study of Poetry" (1880):

There can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them.

Arnold himself chose three passages each from the *Iliad*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Paradise Lost*, as well as two from Shakespeare, all of them very short, ranging from one line to four lines. The quotations from Dante as well as two from the *Iliad* he himself translated, and almost any modern reader will find his renditions so poor and some of his choices so odd that the whole idea is apt to seem quite misguided.

"Ah, unhappy pair, why gave we you to King Peleus, to a mortal? but ye are without old age, and immortal. Was it that with men born to misery ye might have sorrow?"
"Nay, and thou too, old man, in former days wast, as we hear, happy."

These are Arnold's translations from the *Iliad*. One shudders to think of them as infallible touchstones of high poetic quality. Although Arnold obviously considered the original lines the touchstones, it is still a sobering experience to find that a major critic should have penned lines like these in such a context. Yet his choice of four poets remains respectable, and the central insight is helpful. Even if we should prefer the tragic poets of Greece to Dante or Milton, and if—more important—we should reject any hope of infallibility, the basic idea that *we need touchstones* or (to use a term that came into vogue among philosophers seventy-five years later) *paradigms* still seems sound.

To answer the ancient question, What is Man? it will be helpful to consider some haunting and beautiful passages that anyone dealing with this problem should bear in mind. We cannot agree with all of them, as some of them contradict one another; but all of them are worth thinking about and rereading more than once.

To choose a few passages from four great writers about what man is would be quite insufficient. On the other hand, a collection of hundreds of passages would be numbing. Completeness is out of the question, and some discrimination is essential. The most difficult problem is organization; or as Pascal put it in his *Pensées*:* *La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un ouvrage, est de savoir celle qu'il faut mettre la première*, "the last thing one discovers when creating a work is to know what should come first."

* Brunschvicg ed. #19 = Lafuma ed #8.

We shall begin by considering variations on three major themes. Each has been developed by several writers. This should impress these themes firmly on our minds, but at the cost of not really bringing to life any one of the authors.

Next, we shall consider a group of quotations from each of three authors. In this way we should get a better sense of the writers and their conceptions of man.

Both approaches are based on short passages dealing with man. We shall quote texts and reflect on them.

The next chapter is called "Ecce Homo" and focuses on paradigmatic individuals. Again completeness is out of the question. What is wanted is some variety, but neither chaos nor a catalogue.

Finally, it would be cowardly not to state some conclusions. But long before I do this in the final chapter, the reader encounters visual images of man. One might call this sequence a self-contained essay, if one likes to think of it in literary terms; for, the pictures are certainly not mere illustrations. But another way of looking at them seems better. Many writers have offered us "images of man." Since Nietzsche used this phrase in his "Untimely Meditation" on Schopenhauer, it has become fashionable, and many professors are using it. Why should we consider only images that are spelled out in words? Why not visual images of women and children, men, mummies, and mannequins? These images should be considered in their own right and studied before one reads the last chapter and finds out how they relate to the author's views.

8

Only one comment on the photographs is needed at this point. In "The Study of Poetry" Matthew Arnold said:

Most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. . . . Our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge' offered to us by poetry. . . . The best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can.

Probably not one reader in a thousand has marveled that so sensitive and bold a spirit as Arnold should not even have thought of music or the visual arts in this context. In *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (1958), written long before I had read Arnold's essay, I included a section (83) "Religion and Poetry," and a few sentences from that may show very briefly what Arnold and many others have failed to note.

The very conception of a work of art is more dangerous to religion than any scientific conception. Before art became self-conscious and autonomous, in the centuries when architecture and sculpture, poetry and music, were all part of the religious life, religion alone could offer the mass of men lasting bliss.

Shakespeare and Beethoven pose at least as profound a problem for the future of religion as Copernicus and Darwin. The great artist answers to the aspiration which before had to turn to religion: in Beethoven's music the hunger of the soul and its jubilation cease to be religion. What, then, remains to religion? If a museum in Florence offers you a room full of some of Michelangelo's most moving sculptures, what is any church to offer?

Our intelligentsia is for the most part blind to what is not verbal. Literature falls within its horizon, and those who are interested in the arts like to read *about* art. To study a work of art means to them reading about it, and most scholars—not to speak of critics who are journalists—write about what has been written about. Music is different. Millions listen again and again to music they like and do not suppose that reading about music can ever take the place of listening, listening, and listening. But music is experienced as another world that seems to have no bearing on philosophical or religious problems like What is man?

The *lives* of some major artists, however, are obviously relevant to that question, and so

are many, if not most, of Michelangelo's, Rembrandt's, and Goya's *works*. So is much of the visual arts, from Egypt to our own time. But to balance and supplement our approach through the past, it seems better to use new images that have not been seen or written about before, pictures of people of our own time, photographs that show human beings in widely different cultures.

What is man? Any answer that claims to be final discredits itself. There is no definitive answer. Yet few questions are more important to think about, and it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of what man is.

9

Arnold's remarks about poetry, religion, and philosophy were cited mainly to illustrate the verbal bias of our culture. And the passage cited by way of contrast was meant to show how important it is to take art into account. But what of Arnold's contention that philosophy and religion are hollow, while poetry offers a "finer spirit of knowledge?" This is not the place to expose "false shows of knowledge" in philosophy and religion, but the extreme vagueness of the claim that poetry offers a "finer spirit of knowledge" as well as Arnold's claim that he had found "an *infallible* touchstone" may serve as a warning. Those who seek a surrogate for religion usually end up with something that shares some of the worst features of religion—sometimes with a totalitarian ideology. Poetry is obviously preferable, yet we cannot simply imbibe knowledge or truth from poetry or the visual arts. We can bring together religious, philosophical and poetical texts and consider them critically along with a few exemplary individuals and some visual images. And we may hope that anyone who reflects on what man is might do well to bear our selection in mind.

No single selection can possibly claim to be sacrosanct or infallible. But the more one thinks about the question asked by Job and the Psalmist, the more inappropriate, if not ridiculous, seems the conceit of anyone who claims to have the answer.

Many questions call for a crisp reply. This one is a theme for prolonged meditation—something to think about now and then throughout one's life. A book on this problem should not give the false impression that there is one true solution. It should make people more thoughtful by calling dubious assumptions into question and by pioneering a new approach.

III

VARIATIONS ON THREE THEMES

10

Some of the most profound reflections on our question have not been offered as attempts to answer it. But all efforts to answer it have been shallow when they have ignored the three themes that we shall explore here.

All three have recurred and been varied wherever man has stopped to reflect on his lot. Yet it is clear which of the three is primary. What prompts man in the first place to think about his lot is the experience of death and destruction.

Typically, it is the death of a person to whom one has been very close that leads one to think about the meaning of life and the human condition. But it is part of the poignancy of such experiences that most of one's fellowmen are not at all prepared to share one's thoughts and feelings. It is therefore not surprising that the most celebrated statements of our first theme were written under the impression of momentous wars, when large numbers of people had been killed and empires were crumbling. At such times there was an audience for this theme.

We shall again begin with the Hebrew Bible, this time with a passage that can be dated with some confidence. Almost all scholars agree that the fortieth chapter of Isaiah was written when Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, brought an end to the Babylonian exile of the Jews, around 538 before our era. Despite his glad tidings, the prophet stresses man's impermanence. It is hardly strange that the destruction of the great Babylonian empire, which had brought ruin to countless cities, including Jerusalem, should have brought the frailty of humanity to the poet's mind. Yet he did not infer from this that all human efforts are vain. That man is ephemeral is the beginning of wisdom, not its end. And our first passage ends on an affirmative note.

A voice says: Cry!
And he says: What shall I cry?
All flesh is grass
and all its beauty like a flower in the field.
The grass withers,
the flower fades
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.
Surely, grass is the people.
The grass withers,
the flower fades
while the word of our God will stand for ever.
Scale a high mountain
cheering
Zion . . .

There is a similar passage in the *Iliad*. During the ten years' war over Troy, Glaucón, one of the defenders of the city, meets Diomedes, one of the heroes laying siege to it. It is night and they fall into conversation. Diomedes asks his foe about his ancestry. Glaucón's long reply begins with a disparagement of the question, and his imagery is strikingly reminiscent of Isaiah's. He, too, stresses the brevity of human life before he answers Diomedes and gets carried away, in typically Homeric fashion, telling stories about his ancestors. The end of this passage (VI.145ff.) also invites comparison with Isaiah.

Why ask me about my lineage?
All of men's lineages are like the leaves in the forest.
Some the wind scatters upon the earth while others
grow in the budding woods in the warmth of spring.
Thus are men's families, one grows while others are disappearing.
Yet I shall tell you this also that you may know
our ancestors' lineage . . .
. . . and he was my father,
He sent me off to Troy and admonished me often
always to be the first and excel all others
lest I disgrace my fathers' lineage . . .

One could sum up our first theme in a phrase devoid of Homer's and Isaiah's poetry: "What is man? Not much, but he should make the most of it." Actually, Plato said almost precisely that in three passages that are as striking and haunting as anything he ever wrote. Oddly, however, these passages have been largely ignored in the vast literature on Plato. The first of them is so brief that it could be dismissed as a merely parenthetical remark:

Nothing in mortal life is worthy of great seriousness.

If this comment in *The Republic* (604) were all, it might be unseemly to place any weight on it. But in Plato's last great work, *The Laws*, this motif is taken up and developed. Plato introduces an image that is quite different from the theology ascribed to him by most of the commentators who see fit to deal at all with his views of the gods:

Suppose that each of us living creatures is a puppet of gods, designed perhaps as a plaything or perhaps for a serious purpose—we have no way of knowing.

Again, the passage (644) is so brief that one can see why it has been ignored. But in *Laws* (803) the two motifs are fused most impressively and, one might suppose, unforgettably:

Men's doings are not worthy of great seriousness, and yet we are compelled to take them seriously, and that is unfortunate. Since we are in this situation, no doubt, we should be earnest in a suitable way . . . I mean, one should be serious about what is serious and not about what is not serious, and God is worthy of serious and good endeavors while man, as we have said before, is designed as God's plaything, and that is what is best about him. All of us, then, should play this role and play as well as we can, women as well as men . . . We should live playing certain games, sacrificing, singing, and dancing so as to be able to win heaven's favor and to repel and vanquish an enemy in fight.

The bold image of man as a player who might win heaven's favor by playing as well as he can finds an echo in Seneca's essay *On Providence* (II.7):

I really do not wonder that gods sometimes feel like watching [*spectandi*] great men wrestling with some calamity.

Above all, this theme was to be developed beautifully by Shakespeare in some passages that will be quoted in the next chapter.

What Plato himself did with his image of man as a player suffers greatly by comparison with Shakespeare and seems somewhat eccentric and bizarre. But the beginning of the long quotation sums up our first theme definitively:

Men's doings are not worthy of great seriousness, and yet . . .

Western philosophy, not to speak of Plato scholarship, strayed so far from the ethos of Homer and the tragic poets that it is small wonder these pregnant words have found scarcely an echo anywhere; but Nietzsche quoted them in *Human, All Too Human*. Section 628 of that book is very short:

Seriousness in play.—In the evening twilight in Genoa I once heard a long playing of chimes from a tower: it did not want to end and sounded, as if it could not get enough of itself, across the noise of the lanes out into the evening sky and the sea air, so gruesome, so childish at the same time, so full of melancholy. Then I recalled the words of Plato and suddenly felt them in my heart: *everything human is not worthy of great seriousness; nevertheless . . .*

In an article of thirty-five pages, Richard Perkins has distinguished ten preliminary stages of this aphorism before the first edition of the book, showing how Nietzsche lived with this idea for a long time. At one point he called the aphorism *Trotzdem* (nevertheless), then *Epilog*,

and later *Spiel und Ernst* (play and seriousness). But this "Preliminary Analysis of the Aphorism and Its Precursors" never gets beyond the philology on to Nietzsche's or Plato's meaning.

12

The most famous choral ode in Sophocles should also be seen as a variation on our theme. Its first line has often been misquoted as "Wonders are many, but none is more wonderful than man." Again and again we encounter the same human tendency to shut one's eyes to what hurts man's self-esteem. The Eighth Psalm is fondly recalled, Job 7 is not; Plato's startling suggestion that man is a mere puppet is ignored along with his insistence that "nothing in mortal life is worthy of great seriousness"; and Sophocles' tragic outlook is transmuted into a bland and boastful cheerfulness.

Even in poor and misleading translations, the praise of man is followed by a sharp antithesis. The sequence here is not that of Isaiah, Homer, and Plato, who begin by disparaging man and end with an affirmation. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, it is the "and yet" near the end that introduces the motif of mortality and the thought that man can employ his powers for evil no less than good.

Even the beginning of the ode, however, is far from calling man "wonderful." In Aeschylus and Sophocles *deina* never means "wonders" but always something like "terror," and the adjective never means wonderful but always terrible. The adjective actually occurs only nine lines before the sentence at issue here; and there, as usual, it can only mean terrible. In other authors, to be sure, *deinos* sometimes means dangerous, skilful, clever, marvelous, strange, or uncanny, but we cannot simply overlook eleven other occurrences in *Antigone* and twenty-odd in Aeschylus and then choose for this one line the blandest possible meaning. Unquestionably, the intended meaning in this line is "awesome" or "uncanny."

Much is awesome
but nothing more awesome than man.
Even across the grizzled sea
in a wintry southwind
he makes a path
through the waves clashing over him,
and Earth, supreme among gods,
immortal and tireless,
he wears away as he turns the soil
with the offspring of horses and ploughs,
moving back and forth, year after year. . . .
Speech and thought as swift as the wind
and town-forming feelings
he taught himself and how to avoid
the biting cold and the pouring rain,
all wily. Without wiles he faces
death only. From crafty diseases
he found escapes.
Clever beyond the highest hope
is the craft that moves him
sometimes to evil, sometimes to good . . .

13

In the earliest Buddhist scriptures a variation on Plato's "Men's doings are not worthy of great seriousness, and yet . . ." is central. Among these scriptures none is more concise nor considered more venerable than the *Dhammapada*. The sixth verse reads:

The world does not know that we must all come to an end here; but those who know it—their quarrels cease at once.

It would be easy enough to revise Max Müller's fine translation by changing the "but" to read "and yet." The point of the passage, however, is importantly different from Plato's. While Plato concedes that man is not much, this is a passing concession that is made almost by way

of saying: to be sure, that is so, but it will not do any good at all to keep thinking about it. And not one in a hundred among his interpreters has given the point any weight at all. The Buddha, on the other hand, formulated his teaching in four noble truths that we must grasp if we want to be saved from endless rebirth, and the first of these noble truths is the universality of suffering and death. The "but" which introduces the second half of our quotation from the *Dhammapada* does not encourage us to put the first half out of our mind. On the contrary, it introduces the assertion that the knowledge of our mortality spells liberation.

The mood of the early Buddhist scriptures is as different from Isaiah's as it is from Plato's. The prophets say more or less—more beautifully and less crudely: To be sure, all flesh is grass, but the word of our God will stand for ever, and what he wants you to do is this. In other words, each of us is as ephemeral as the grass in the field, but there is no point in dwelling on that; there is work to be done.

In the *Iliad* death is ubiquitous. The poem is drenched in blood. Death upon death is described with an interest in where the lance entered the body and where it came out. We are never allowed to forget about death any more than the heroes are. Their attitudes are shaped by their consciousness of mortality. Their ethos might be summed up briefly: We must die anyway, and the only choice we have is whether we try to stretch out our lives a little longer and forego glory, or whether we show great courage and are honored in death and remembered in song.

The idea that songs, too, are like leaves in the forest and that man's memory is like grass that won't last is not faced, but the anti-heroic conclusion at the end of that line of thought is very starkly expressed by Achilles in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus visits the underworld—in a line that Plato cites in the *Republic* (386) to say that it must be censored lest it corrupt the young: "I would rather be on earth as a servant, hired by a landless man with little to live on, than be king over all the dead and spent" (IX.489).

The Buddha faces up to the thought that not only each of us is ephemeral but that glory is, too. And he teaches that once men know this, "their quarrels cease at once."

One should not place too much weight on a single verse. But this theme is elaborated throughout the *Dhammapada*. Instead of piling up quotations, it seems best to quote one short chapter (11) in its entirety.

Old Age

How is there laughter, how is there joy, as this world is always burning? Why do you not seek a light, ye who are surrounded by darkness?

Look at this dressed-up lump, covered with wounds, joined together, sickly, full of many thoughts, which has no strength, no hold!

This body is wasted, full of sickness, and frail; this heap of corruption breaks to pieces, life indeed ends in death.

Those white bones, like gourds thrown away in the autumn, what pleasure is there in looking at them?

After a stronghold has been made of the bones, it is covered with flesh and blood, and there dwell in it old age and death, pride and deceit.

The brilliant chariots of kings are destroyed, the body also approaches destruction, but the virtue of good people never approaches destruction—thus do the good say to the good.

A man who has learnt little, grows old like an ox; his flesh grows, but his knowledge does not grow.

Looking for the maker of this tabernacle, I shall have to run through a course of many births, so long as I do not find (him); and painful is birth again and again.

But now, maker of the tabernacle, thou hast been seen; thou shalt not make up this tabernacle again.

All thy rafters are broken, thy ridge-pole is sundered; the mind, approaching the Eternal (visankhara, nirvana) has attained to the extinction of all desires.

Men who have not observed proper discipline, and have not gained treasure in their youth, perish like old herons in a lake without fish.

Men who have not observed proper discipline, and have not gained treasure in their youth, lie, like broken bows, sighing after the past.

Our first theme could be compressed into four words: "Man is ephemeral, but . . ." The passages we have considered are in a sense egalitarian. Except for the last part of the last quota-

tion, they ignore differences among men while stressing the common human lot.

They have a lyrical quality, they are beautiful, and as one reads them one is apt to find them quite uncontroversial, although they call attention to aspects of the human condition that most people prefer not to think about. Yet they are controversial in two ways. Some people have maintained after all that some differences between human beings *are* very important. Moreover, these passages suggest that death is final, but many people believe that there is a life after death. Again, the ending of the last quotation is at least a partial exception. Here death is considered final for the wise, while those who have learnt little are born again and again.

Death is the great equalizer, unless it is considered not the absolute end of life but rather the beginning of another life in which human beings meet radically different fates. Yet the society pictured in the *Iliad* was not egalitarian any more than the society to which the poem was addressed. The Buddha was much more egalitarian and was opposed to the caste system that dominated the society in which he lived.

The beauty of some statements of our first theme is impressive; yet "*all* flesh is grass," not only human flesh; animals, too, are like leaves in the forest. Even flowers are ephemeral, but . . . The poignancy of the theme is due to the fact that man often forgets that he is not so different from other animals and from plants. He sometimes fancies that he is "little less than God," to recall the Eighth Psalm. The first theme makes good sense as a bold antithesis to any such conceit; but the final adequacy of this theme depends on how it is completed, on what comes after the "but." And in one way or another it has usually been completed by introducing our second theme.

14

Our second theme is the radical inequality of men. In the final quarter of the twentieth century the difference between egalitarianism and inegalitarianism has come to be thought of by many people in Manichaean terms, as if the former were good and the latter evil. On the face of it this is irrational. Human beings are obviously very different, and any answer to the question what man is that mentions only what all human beings have in common is bound to be uninteresting unless it includes at least potentialities that are developed in some people but not in others. And even if we should insist that the potentialities are common to all, it could still be objected that by no means all people have these capacities in equal measure.

What is needed here is a preliminary understanding of the theme. I shall reserve my own views for the final chapter. First, we must see how this theme is related to the insistence that man is ephemeral, but . . . To put the answer very succinctly, it is felt that not all men are equally like grass, leaves, or animals. Some, though mortal, do not age like oxen. Some aim "always to be the first and excel all others." Some play more eminent roles than others, and some play better than others. Some make more of their lives than others do.

When death is not considered the absolute end, the vision of the afterlife is almost always inegalitarian, and often it is Manichaean, as some are rewarded and others punished. All of this helps to explain why inegalitarianism is now so widely considered wicked. The most influential versions of it have been used to justify the degradation of large numbers of people.

Manu's laws, which define the Indian caste system, furnish the most striking example. The central idea goes back to the ninetieth hymn of Book X of the *Rigveda*, an account of the creation of man that almost reads like a deliberate antithesis to the story in *Genesis*. When the gods divided Purusha, who had "a thousand eyes, a thousand feet,"

the Brahmin was his mouth,
of both his arms was the Rajanya made,
his thighs became the Vaishya,
from his feet the Shudra was produced.

We find the same conceit in the first chapter of *The Laws of Manu* (31), the only difference being that the Rajanya, the warrior caste, is there called Kshatriya. Manu proceeds to offer elaborate laws for the conduct of each caste, and the Shudras are held to be slaves by nature:

A Shudra, though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who could set him free from it? (VIII.413f.)

The only hope for the Shudra is that if he is a devoted "servant of his betters" he may attain a higher caste in a future life when, after death, his soul enters another body. (IX.335)

The Indian word for caste is *varna*, which means color, and scholars are agreed that the Shudras were the dark-skinned native population that was vanquished by the fair-skinned Aryan invaders whose language and religion were related to those of the ancient Iranians and Greeks. The Vedas were the creation of these invaders who bequeathed to India the conceit that fair skin is beautiful and dark skin ugly, a prejudice that millions of Indians share to this day. They are stunned when a foreigner finds some people with dark skin beautiful. To say that many people with light skin are not nearly so beautiful would be considered the ultimate in bad taste as well as insulting.

Nevertheless, not only Indians admire the religious legacy of the Aryans, above all the Vedas and the somewhat later Upanishads. It is by no means widely recognized, though a number of scholars have noted the fact, that Hinduism owes far more to the indigenous non-Aryan population than to this Sanskrit lore. And even most scholars have failed to notice that in the Vedas and Upanishads there are no references to writing, to temples, or to sculptures; nor have archaeologists unearthed any evidence that the Aryans were literate or that they had architecture and visual arts. This is the more remarkable because the non-Aryan Indus valley culture that came to an end in the sixteenth century before our era, about a hundred years before the Aryans arrived in India, was literate, and their cities and sculptures have been excavated. But from that time until the age of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka in the third century before our era we encounter an archaeological blank. In the age of Ashoka we suddenly encounter writing, sculpture, and architecture, all of them bearing witness to outside influences from the Hellenistic world, which included Iran and the Near East as well as Greece. The architecture and sculpture that developed later in Southern India is quite generally acknowledged to have drawn much of its inspiration from the native non-Aryan population, the so-called Dravidians.

While many Indians think of their Aryan ancestors as having more or less invented civilization perhaps ten thousand years ago, it is far from evident that the invaders, who considered the dark-skinned native population to be so inferior that it was destined by nature for slavery, were culturally superior to the vanquished. There is no need to insist that the invaders were inferior in every way, or that the situation very closely paralleled that of the Germanic tribes who, much later, invaded the Roman empire. Obviously, the native population of India had no organization remotely comparable to the Roman empire. It is amply sufficient to insist that the inhuman conceit of the Aryan invaders and their brutal treatment of the vanquished were unjustified and became a curse under which India still smart.

If one wished to frame an indictment of traditional Hindu inequality, one could pile up quotations from the Law of Manu about Shudras and, still worse, about outcastes. One would also have to quote a rule found twice in the Bhagavadgita, the most popular and influential religious scripture of Hinduism:

Better one's own duty done badly
than the duty of another done well. (3.35, 18.47)

Nor could one ignore the Gita's vision of "a foul hell."

Full of selfishness, force, and arrogance,
lust and anger,
these malicious people despise me
as they dwell in their bodies and in those of others.
These envious haters, the lowest of men,
I hurl ever into devilish wombs,
birth upon birth.
Caught in devilish wombs,
deluded birth upon birth,
they never attain me and sink to the lowest state. (16.16)

Finally, one would explore the social realities that were sanctified and made worse by *The Laws of Manu* and the Bhagavadgita.

To gain a better understanding of what man is, it is less helpful to give vent to righteous indignation than it is to ask whether the doctrine that men are importantly unequal is inspired solely by pernicious conceit. We should not ignore the pernicious aspects of this doctrine and romanticize it. But we need not go to the opposite extreme of assuming that because inequality has inspired and been used to justify inhuman treatment of millions of people, the claim that all men are equal must be true.

15

Inequality is so fraught with emotion that it is as difficult to discuss our second theme rationally as it once was to discuss heresy. It is widely considered as pernicious as heresy once was, and the fact that, unlike most heresies, it really has been associated with cruel inhumanity does not make it any easier to determine what, if any, elements of truth there might be in it.

One might suppose that the inequality tradition in Christianity would predispose many people in once Christian countries to allow that inequality may not be entirely devoid of truth. But in modern times equality has become so sacred that people who still have strong emotional ties to Christianity are apt to deny that Christianity has been a major source of inequality; and some writers actually claim that Christianity introduced the notion of the infinite value of every human soul. Other untruths in Hegel's philosophy are widely mocked, and some untruths are erroneously ascribed to him and held to discredit him, but Hegel's odd assertion in the third edition of his *Encyclopedia* (section 482) has been uncritically repeated *ad nauseam*: "This idea came into the world through Christianity, according to which the individual *as such* has infinite value . . ."

This assertion involves two claims: that Christianity teaches the infinite value of every individual, and that it was only through Christianity—and not, for example, long before—that this idea entered the world. The first claim could be true and the second false; but as it happens, both are false. "Infinite value" is not very clear, though precisely this phrase was picked up by Harnack, the liberal Protestant theologian, in his vastly influential book, "The Essence of Christianity,"* and by ever so many others.

Harnack's "infinite value of every human soul," like Hegel's dictum, gives the impression that it was Christianity that introduced a new equality respect for every human "individual as such." There is more than a suggestion here that a human being has rights simply by virtue of being an individual. In fact, however, not one of the major Christian churches adopted this position before modern times.

No sooner had Christianity become the state religion of the Roman empire than it instituted religious persecution. Slavery was not abolished, and it is instructive to read the article on slavery in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1921). Not only did Charlemagne and Henry the Fowler spread Christianity by force of arms, but they sold the captives they took as slaves. And the Christian author of the article points out that at a much later date "the abolitionist could point to no one text in the Gospels in defence of his position." The Church tended, "owing to its excessive care for the rights of the masters, even to perpetuate what would otherwise have passed away." The Church itself "was a slave-owner." "Legislation forbade Christian slaves to be sold to pagans or Jews, but otherwise tended to recognize slavery as a normal institution."

The most scholarly and comprehensive treatment of these questions is Ernst Troeltsch's in his monumental work, "The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches and Groups."** He quotes Luther's epistle to Christian prisoners of war who had been made slaves by their Muslim captors:

You are robbing and stealing your body from your master who has bought it or acquired it in some other way so that it is no longer yours but his property like cattle or other possessions (p. 581f.).

In the same vein, Luther upbraided those who wished to abolish bondslavery closer to home and told them to read St. Paul.

* *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900), pp. 63ff.

** *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1912).

This article goes straight against the Gospel and advocates robbery so that each robs his master, who owns it, of his body. For a bondsman can be a Christian and have Christian freedom just as a prisoner and a sick man can be Christians without being free. This article wants to make all men equal and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom, which is impossible. (XVI, 85)

That Luther and Calvin were as far from the outlook embodied in the American Bill of Rights as were the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox churches is so evident that those who wish to link Christianity and egalitarianism often claim only that all men are equal *in the eyes of God*. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to make any sense of this claim in the light of Christian teachings about hell. The doctrine of eternal damnation is found not only in the aforementioned churches and in Luther and Calvin but also in the Gospels. The New Testament spread the Zoroastrian vision of a final judgment in which most men are consigned to eternal punishment.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand: Come, O blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . . Then he will say to those at his left hand: Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels . . . And they will go away into the eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

This passage in Matthew 25 is actually more attractive than most of Jesus' references to eternal damnation; for here the criterion for the separation is whether one has been kind to the poor and the sick, welcomed strangers and visited prisoners. This ethos is closer to the Hebrew prophets and the Buddha than it is to most of the Gospel passages about hell, and none of the major Christian churches ever made conduct and kindness decisive; none of them took the line that humane individuals who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus would be saved, while believers could not be saved unless they helped the poor and sick and were kind to strangers and prisoners. Nor can one say that this failure amounted to a betrayal of the Gospels.

The fourth Gospel, of which many people who evidently have not read it think that it stresses love more than the other three, insists repeatedly:

Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (3.5)
 He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God. (3.18)
 He who believes has eternal life. (6.47)
 No one comes to the Father but by me. (14.6)

And in the coda of Mark's gospel we are told similarly:

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents . . .

The doctrine that unbelievers would suffer eternal torment was accompanied by the explicit teaching that one must not feel compassion for the damned. St. Augustine, for example, who is revered as much by traditional Protestants as he is by Catholics, insisted on this point, following Luke 16.* And the notion that the blessed in heaven would enjoy the spectacle of the tortures of the damned was a commonplace in the Christian Middle Ages. Anyone who might have been appalled by it could not cite against it texts commending compassion for the damned; and Mark, Matthew, and Luke agreed in ascribing to Jesus words in which he *comforted* his disciples with the prospect that anyone who did not accept their teaching would fare worse on the Day of Judgment than the worst evildoers of all time.**

* *City of God*, Book XXI.

** Mark 6.11, Matthew 10.14f., Luke 9 and 10.

If unbelievers were tortured for ever and ever, it seemed reasonable to prevent the spread of unbelief by using temporal torture as a weapon, and it could be argued—and was argued by St. Thomas Aquinas—that the Inquisition was prompted by a charitable concern for the eternal welfare of those who might be corrupted by heretics.* Torture for a few days was as nothing compared to the divine punishment.

Clearly, traditional Christianity did not champion *secular* equality, and it is hard to see what could be meant by claiming that it recognized the equality of all men in God's eyes. Seeing that God was held to torment non-Christians for ever and ever, the only kind of equality that could possibly be meant would be equality of opportunity—if it had really been part of Christian teaching that all men were given an equal opportunity to be saved. But it meets the eye that those who lived before Jesus as well as the millions who never heard of him were not given equal opportunity. Nor did those brought up in another faith have the same opportunity, even if they were exposed to Christian teaching, as did those who were baptized as infants and reared in the Christian faith.

Actually, Christian teachers went out of their way to deny any notion that all human beings had been given the same opportunity to be saved. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church insisted, and after the Reformation the Council of Trent reaffirmed, that unbaptized infants, "be their parents Christian or infidel, are born to eternal misery and perdition."^{**} Both Luther and Calvin insisted on divine predestination, on which Calvin laid special stress, and this doctrine was embodied in the Westminster Confession, which is the basic document of Presbyterianism, and in various other Protestant Confessions of Faith that came later. Here is the wording of the seventeenth-century Baptist Confessions: "God hath, before the foundation of the world, foreordained some men to eternal life through Jesus Christ, to the praise and glory of His grace; leaving the rest in their sin, to their just condemnation, to the praise of His justice."[†]

Thus the inegalitarian theme was developed in Christianity as in Hinduism in ways which are so brutal that it is no wonder many humane people have jumped to the conclusion that the only decent course is to embrace egalitarianism, asserting that, appearances notwithstanding, all human beings are fundamentally equal. In the last chapter I shall argue against this conclusion. Meanwhile it remains striking that inegalitarianism has never been formulated in passages that invite comparison with the beautiful variations on our first theme. Homer and Plato, of course, were not egalitarian, but almost all variations on our second theme lack the gentleness of the intimations of mortality and are, unlike the passages on death, frightening.

16

Our third and last theme is not a synthesis of the other two but a development of the second theme and meant to be frightening. The classical formulation is Latin: *lupus est homo homini*, man is a wolf to man.

This formulation comes from *The Comedy of Asses* (*Arsinaria* in Latin) by Plautus. Titus Maccius (or Maccus) Plautus (about 251 to 184) translated Greek comedies into Latin and was not beyond taking some liberties with the original texts. In his short prologue to this play he mentions that the Greek play, *Onagos*, was written by Demophilus. The context in which the oft quoted phrase occurs is trivial. Two slaves try to persuade a stranger to give them some money, assuring him that they will give it to their master. The stranger, however, refuses, and the dialogue continues for a long time before he says:

Perhaps. And yet no one
will induce me today to entrust this money to you whom I don't know.
A wolf is man to man, not a man, when he does not know him.

This dialogue near the end of the second act (lines 493–95) clearly comes from the Greek, but whether the last line does, or whether that was injected by Plautus, we do not know. In any case our theme became much more prominent in Rome than it had ever been in Greece.

* *Summa Theologica*, II-II, XI.

** For further discussion, see Coulton (1922) and (1923) and Kaufmann (1961), section 28.

† See Bettenson or Schaff.

For a variation on this theme we turn to Cicero's *De Officiis*. This book on duties was written in 44 before our era, the year Caesar was murdered. Of the two men Cicero cites, Panaetius was a second-century Stoic philosopher born in Rhodes, and Dicaearchus (358–285), born in Messina, was one of Aristotle's disciples.

We are lengthier here than necessary. Who, after all, does not realize what Panaetius shows at length, that nobody can accomplish great and beneficial things either as a leader in war or as a statesman at home without the participation of many men? He mentions Themistocles, Pericles, Cyrus, Agesilaus, and Alexander, and denies that without the support of many men they could have accomplished what they did. In a matter not moot he employs witnesses not needed.

While we derive great utility from the cooperation and agreement of men, there is also no detestable disaster that does not come to man from man. There is a book on the demise of men by Dicaearchus, the great and ample Peripatetic who, after collecting such other causes as floods, diseases, and devastation, as well as sudden attacks by hordes of beasts that, he points out, destroyed certain groups of people, points out how many more men were wiped out by attacks of men, meaning wars or upheavals, than by any other calamity.

Since it thus admits of no doubt that it is men that profit and harm men the most, I propose that what distinguishes virtue is to win men's minds and to incline them to their own advantage. (II.16f.)

Cicero is indeed lengthier than necessary, and Seneca, a century later, is lengthier still. As time went on, the Romans became more and more enamored of size, as their architecture and sculpture show no less than their prose. Still, there are three passages in Seneca that develop our theme in an interesting way, and one of them actually repeats the ancient Biblical question, What is man?

The first occurs in his "Moral Letters to Lucilius" (*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, CIII. 1–3) and is very close to the quotations from Plautus and Cicero.

Accidents, even if grave, like shipwrecks or being thrown out of a vehicle, are rare; from man comes to man daily danger. . . . Even a storm gives warning before it strikes, houses creak before they collapse, and smoke announces fire. But the peril from man is sudden; and the closer it comes, the more diligently is it concealed.

You err if you trust the mien of those you meet. They have the appearance of men but the souls of beasts, except that beasts are pernicious at the first encounter and do not pursue those they pass by; nor do they harm anyone unless need incites them. Either hunger or fear propels them to fight. Man *likes* to undo man.

You should think what peril issues from man and realize what is man's duty. Consider both [peril and duty] lest you be harmed or harm others.

Another passage in the same book (VII. 1–8) elaborates how man in ancient Rome was a wolf to man:

What should you avoid above all? The crowd (*turbam*). As yet you cannot entrust yourself to it safely. I shall confess my own weakness; I never bring back the habits (*mores*) I took with me. My composure is disturbed (*turbatur*). . . . Association with the multitude is harmful; everybody commends or impresses or smears on us some vice, unnoticed. The greater the throng with which we mingle, the greater the peril.

Nothing is so deleterious for good habits as to sit around at the spectacles. For through pleasure vice enters surreptitiously. What do you suppose I mean? I return greedier, more ambitious, voluptuous, and crueler and more inhuman because I have been among people. I chanced upon the noon spectacles, expecting sport and spice and something relaxing to grant men's eyes some respite from men's gore. The opposite happened. The previous fights had been mercy itself. Now all frills are omitted and it is mere murder. They have nothing to shield them, the whole body is exposed to blows, and every stroke is a hit. . . .

In the morning men are thrown to lions and bears, at noon to the spectators. They order that the slayers meet slayers, and they keep the victor for another kill. The issue of all fights is death, and it is accomplished by iron and fire. This happens while the arena is empty. "But he robbed and killed a man." So what? Because he killed he merits the same fate; but how did you merit, wretch, to watch it? "Kill, scourge, burn!" "Why does he attack the iron so timidly? Why doesn't he kill more boldly? Why doesn't he like to die? . . ."

Young minds not firm in the right must be kept from the populace; one easily joins the majority. . . . What do you think happens when habits are publicly assaulted? Of necessity, either imitation or loathing. Yet both are to be avoided. Don't become like the bad because they are many, nor be a foe of the many because they are unlike you. Withdraw into yourself as much as you can. Associate with those who will make you better. Welcome those whom you can make better. This works both ways, and men learn as they teach.

Our last passage from Seneca is found in his "Letter to Marcia on Consolation" (*De consolatione ad Marciam*, XI. 1-3). She had lost a son.

What is the point of lamenting over parts? The whole of life is lamentable. . . . Why this oblivion of our own and the common lot? Mortal you were born, mortals you have borne. A putrid and limp body and often assailed by diseases, did you hope that from such feeble material you had borne something solid and eternal? Dead is your son; that is, he has run his course to that end to which all those you consider more fortunate are hastening. That is where the crowd which squabbles in the Forum, sits in the theaters, or prays in the temples, is going at different speeds; and those you cherish and revere and those you despise one kind of ashes will equalize. This is plainly what the voice ascribed to the Pythian oracle said: Know Thyself!

What is man? A vessel breakable by any tremor, by any shaking. No great storm is needed to smash you; any collision destroys you. What is man? A feeble and fragile body, naked, defenseless by nature, requiring the help of others, exposed to all of fortune's affronts . . .

17

If one knows something about Seneca, the passages quoted here gain additional dimensions. Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a Stoic philosopher, tragic poet, statesman, and multimillionaire. He was born in Cordoba, Spain, about 4 B.C. and wrote the "Consolations," in which we encounter the question, What is man? in the forties, when he was an exile in Corsica. After his return to Rome, where he spent most of his life, he became the tutor of Nero, who was born in 37. When Nero became the fifth Roman emperor in 54, Seneca drafted his first speech. In the words of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974), Seneca became "Rome's leading intellectual figure in the mid-first century A.D., virtual ruler with his friends of the Roman world between 54 and 62." In 59 Seneca is said to have condoned and perhaps even helped to contrive Nero's murder of his own mother. In 62 Seneca retired and wrote his "Letters to Lucilius." In 65 he was accused of conspiracy and commanded by Nero to commit suicide. He did, and he died well.

Plato had thought that man's woes would never cease until either philosophers became kings, or kings and rulers took up philosophy (*Republic*, 473). Few lines by a philosopher have been quoted more often, yet Seneca is hardly ever considered in this connection. He should be.

When St. Paul arrived in Rome in the year 60 to spread Christianity, Seneca was the most influential man in Rome, and his moral ideas were admired by Nero. Nero? Was he not one of the greatest monsters of all time? Might one not answer the question, What is man? by saying, "Seneca, but also Nero"? And yet one might have said of Nero before he attained the throne what Fortinbras says of Hamlet:

. . . he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally.

In fact, he did prove very noble, and this was due to Seneca's influence—certainly not to his mother's.

His father had died when Nero was about three, and he was brought up by his mother, Agrippina. She was the sister of the infamous emperor Caligula and a great-granddaughter of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. She poisoned her second husband and connived at the murder of the wife of the emperor Claudius, her uncle, whom she then married. As empress, she persuaded Claudius to make Nero his heir, passing over his own son whom she eventually poisoned. Nero became emperor when Agrippina poisoned her husband, Claudius.

The first time Nero was required to sign a death warrant, he exclaimed: "Why was I taught to write?" Soon he abolished capital punishment and prohibited all contests in the circus that involved bloodshed. In their place he instituted athletic and poetic contests as well as com-

petitions in the theater. He eased the lot of slaves by allowing them to bring civil complaints against their masters. He forgave those who reviled him in epigrams, and even those accused of plotting against him.

How can all this be reconciled with Nero's reputation? Nero changed after he had his mother killed, in 59, but he never did half the things of which he was accused after his death. One can imagine how furious Agrippina must have been that her son refused to be dominated by her; and since she was, beyond doubt, a woman who would stop at nothing, one can see why Nero and Seneca agreed that she must die. But Nero had loved as well as dreaded his mother, and having her put to death may have unhinged his mind. That it should not have been a very stable mind to begin with is not surprising when one considers his heredity, the environment in which he had been raised, and the brutality of his predecessors on the throne. Tiberius, the second emperor, had become cruel to the point of madness. Caligula, the third emperor and Nero's uncle, had become clinically insane. Claudius, the fourth in line, was a historian as well as a soldier and a very interesting personality, but he had a temple erected to himself, he married Agrippina, and he was a brutal man in his own right.

In 59 or 60 Nero began to give public performances, and eventually he appeared on the stage. In 62 he fell in love with the wife of a senator who eventually succeeded him as emperor, and Nero put to death his own wife to marry Otho's. The same year he banished Seneca and then became more and more involved in various religious cults. Recent scholarship has acquitted him of all responsibility for the fire that ravaged Rome in 64, and also of the charge that he initiated the persecution of Christians.

Nero's early successors honored his memory, and Plutarch and Josephus, two great historians who had been his contemporaries, denounced the incipient calumnies against him. Later, the emperor Trajan (98-117) and his successors turned against Nero and destroyed not only the buildings that he had put up but also

the many works in which Lucan, Plutarch, Rusticus, and many other writers commemorated the period of his reign. Under these emperors, Tacitus, Suetonius, and later Dio Cassius wrote the biographies of Nero known today. Lastly, the Christian Church, triumphant under the emperor Constantine I the Great, furthered the legend of Nero as a monster and even added to it in the 15th century by drawing upon the apocrypha of Sulpicius Severus, a Christian ascetic and historian of the early 5th century, to transform Nero into Antichrist, the first executioner of Christians.

Thus ends the article on Nero in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974).

Seneca has never captured the imagination of millions of people the way Nero has. The fact that Nero's tutor, who was also the most influential and powerful man in Rome when Paul first came there, wrote about man's lot and morals much as a Christian might be supposed to have written about such matters, but without all the theological subtleties of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, has evoked little comment, and Seneca's often striking formulations are scarcely ever quoted. Why not?

Seneca is as tedious as Polonius. He says many fine things but goes on long after the reader has got the idea. The passages quoted here make him look better than he is because they represent three highlights culled from hundreds of pages. He had the Romans' ability to put a point neatly and very concisely, but also the Romans' inordinate pride in their prose. He is a peacock, and having said something well he cannot resist saying it no less well several times more.

Still, what Seneca says is worth remembering and, in small doses, enhances our understanding of man, notably of the theme that nobody ever understood better than the Romans: *lupus est homo homini*, a wolf is man to man. The Romans had reasons for knowing that and repeating it. Not since the destruction of the Assyrian empire had the world seen such wolves. Yet posterity has been kind to them. Even those who are not wolves like to howl with the wolves.

IV

SHAKESPEARE, PASCAL, NIETZSCHE

18

Instead of following one theme through several writers, we shall now consider, one by one, three authors who sounded many themes. Shakespeare's and Nietzsche's works are so rich that one could easily fill a small book with apposite quotations from their writings. In Pascal's *Pensées* there are not nearly so many relevant passages, but there are some that have been cited again and again because they are so impressive. The material assembled in this chapter merits inclusion in any collection of touchstones for our theme.

Beginning with Shakespeare, we shall proceed in chronological order. We shall draw on five of his plays, of which *As You Like It* is the earliest, having been written in 1600 or the year before. Hardly anyone would rank this comedy with the other plays to be cited here, but it contains one of the most magnificent descriptions ever written of man's lot. This passage takes up Plato's theme that man is a player.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II.7)

What is new here is the sense of time and development which explodes the rigid Platonic conceit that each man and woman is born for one role and one role only. At that point Plato was still close to Manu's laws and the rule of the Bhagavadgita:

Better one's own duty done badly
than the duty of another done well.

This was actually one of the reasons why Plato would not have any theatrical performances in his ideal city. He opposed the idea of one person playing more than one role. In Greek tragedy the main actors usually played several very different roles even in a single play. In some ways the world of Greek tragedy is more open, more humane, and more mindful of time and development than Plato's world.

In literature the evolution of a character from childhood to old age can be traced back—and is pursued in *Time Is an Artist*—all the way to David and Jacob in the Bible. But there we do not have the image of the stage and of men and women as “merely players.” In Shakespeare this image is obviously not so much the fruit of erudition and a borrowing from Seneca and Plato as it is a comparison of man’s lot with what the poet knew best: the actor’s life.

The passage is so familiar that one is apt not to notice how much it illuminates the human condition. Ever so many discussions of that have ignored what Shakespeare says here and have been the worse for it. Man’s lot is not something static but consists essentially of the development from one stage to another.

Hamlet was probably written in 1601 or 1602 and is among other things a virtual compendium of familiar quotations. Here it will suffice to single out one which is surely influenced by the Eighth Psalm:

. . . it goes so heavily with my disposition
that this goodly frame, the earth,
seems to me a sterile promontory;
this most excellent canopy, the air,
look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament,
this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—
why, it appeareth no other thing to me
than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

What a piece of work is a man!
how noble in reason!
how infinite in faculties!
in form and moving how express and admirable!
in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god!
the beauty of the world,
the paragon of animals!
And yet to me
what is this quintessence of dust?
Man delights not me—
no, nor woman neither,
though by your smiling you seem to say so. (II.2)

Of course, one cannot rashly ascribe to the poet all the views expressed by one or another of his characters, not even if that character is one of the very greatest and most memorable that he or anyone else ever created. It might even be said that *Hamlet* is merely venting his spleen. Still, it remains noteworthy that Shakespeare gave such superlative expression to this melancholy, bitter view of man, by no means only in one passing speech. *Hamlet* voices similar feelings throughout the play, and other characters develop this theme in some of Shakespeare’s other tragedies and comedies.

This passage, too, can be seen as a variation on the theme, Man is ephemeral, but . . . The movement here, of course, is the opposite. We are closer to the chorus in *Antigone*.

What a piece of work is a man! . . .
And yet . . .

What is new, apart from the poetry, is the deliberate subjectivity which, like the distinction between the seven ages of man in *As You Like It*, introduces a certain relativity: “And yet to me . . .” We are not informed, as by an oracle, that man is not much. We are confronted with a mood, an attitude, a point of view. It is not suggested that this is the only possible view. Neither can we leave it out of account.

Hamlet’s bitterness is no mere passing fancy. This mood deepens in the best known and greatest plays of Shakespeare’s later years. *King Lear* was probably written in 1605/06, and the whole of it is an overwhelmingly bitter depiction of man’s lot. While Gloucester’s famous outcry in the first scene of the fourth act cannot be said to express the poet’s own considered view, it gives definitive expression to the mood that the poet has built up:

As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods.
They kill us for their sport.

No poet ever wrote more magnificently about death than Shakespeare did in the final scene of the play, in three lines spoken by Lear and three spoken by Kent:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never never, never!

Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

Here we are far beyond the insight that all flesh is grass and that man is ephemeral. Here a supreme poet gives voice to the grief felt at the death of a person one loved, but then also to the subjectivity of this emotion and its egocentricity. For the survivor, death is cruel; for the dead, liberation.

In *Macbeth*, written a year later, the image of the player reappears. Again we are in the last act of the tragedy, and it is arguable that Macbeth's speech on hearing that his wife has died is, at least poetically, the high point of the play.

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (V.5)

The image of life as a *poor* player and a tale told by an *idiot*, "signifying nothing," reaches depths of nihilism that had never before been explored so passionately and beautifully.

Of course, this speech, too, is a variation on our first theme, though the "and yet" is not sounded in so many words. It is implicit in Macbeth's behavior and eventually expressed in the last line of the scene:

At least we'll die with harness on our back!

And again in Macbeth's last words:

Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries 'Hold, enough!'

In taking leave of Shakespeare we turn to one of the two speeches with which Shakespeare himself has often been said to have taken leave of his public, in *The Tempest*, written in 1611. In the Epilogue, Prospero seems to speak for himself only, but in the first scene of Act V, and in Act IV from which we shall quote, he transcends his persona and speaks for the poet as well as himself. In a collection of touchstone passages about man's lot one simply cannot omit these lines:

like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Is this still despair? The bitterness is gone, and one may recall Sartre's great line, "Life begins on the other side of despair." What was beheld in bitterness and grief is not renounced

for a mellower vision. What is mellower is only the mood. If the poet gives expression to moods he knows at first hand—which one can hardly doubt—he seems to have found peace without trimming his understanding.

19

Pascal's reflections on man's lot are found in his posthumously published *Pensées*, a book that is as elusive as its author. Pascal was born in 1623 and lost his mother in 1626. At sixteen, he wrote an essay on conic sections, published in 1640, and at twenty he was constructing a calculating machine to help his father in his work. It has been hailed as the first digital calculator. Still in his twenties, he made pioneering contributions to the study of barometers and the vacuum, invented the syringe and the hydraulic press, and wrote an important essay on scientific method. If he had never written the *Pensées*, he would still be remembered as a scientific genius and as the brilliant polemicist who published *Les Provinciales*, defending the Jansenist movement in contemporary Roman Catholicism and attacking the Jesuits.

These "Provincial Letters" were written after his conversion experience during the night of November 23, 1654, which he commemorated on a piece of paper, the so-called *Mémorial*, that he sewed into his coat and always carried with him:

From about 10:30 at night until about 12:30. FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ . . . Jesus Christ . . . Let me never be separated from Him.

Pascal's father had had an accident in 1646 and was cared for until his death in 1651 by two Jansenists. Pascal's passionate interest in religion goes back to this period, and his sister became a nun at Port Royal when their father died. Although Pascal opposed this step, he visited her often, and in January 1655 he himself went to one of the Port Royal convents for a period of two weeks. After that he wrote only at the request of the Jansenists of Port Royal and never published anything at all over his own name. The letters "by a provincial" are the major work he published during this period. The *Pensées* were unfinished when he died in 1662, not yet forty.

Pascal's projected title for the work was not "Thoughts," but "Apology for the Christian Religion." The book is a collection of notes that were published eight years after his death under the title, "Thoughts of M. Pascal on Religion and Some Other Subjects." There are two important manuscripts. The first is in Pascal's own hand and was long considered the authoritative text, until it was established after 1930 that it had been pasted together after the author's death. Hence it could no longer be assumed that the sequence of the notes in this manuscript coincided with Pascal's intentions. It is now accepted that a copy of Pascal's notes by one of his relatives brings us as close as we can get to the writer's own organization of his material. The two most important French editions of the work are those of Leon Brunschvicg, the senior editor of the *Oeuvres complètes*, which represents the old order, and that of Louis Lafuma, whose text is now considered the best we have.

The two central motifs of the work are man's wretched condition and an apology for Christianity. To the author's mind the first was clearly meant to pave the way for the second: without Christianity, he felt, man was lost. But what has made the book Pascal's most popular work by far is definitely not the second part with its attempts at allegorical interpretations of the Bible or its review of rabbinical texts, based on what Richard Popkin has characterized as "the recently rediscovered Spanish anti-Semitic classic by Raimundus Martinus, *Pugio Fidei*," or Pascal's views on the early church or on the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. The life of the book and Pascal's posthumous fame are inseparable from the brilliant prose in which he offered his view of man's lot.

For those primarily interested in the history of this tormented soul it is essential to know that toward the end he had a falling out with the theologians of Port Royal, that his final illness probably carcinomatous meningitis following a cancer of the stomach, involved horrendous physical suffering, and that the parish priest attending him in the end was not a Jansenist and claimed that in the end Pascal submitted entirely to the Pope and the Roman Catholic church.

But some of the notes of the *Pensées* have gained an independent life of their own and belong in our collection of touchstones.

Our first quotation is much less important and less familiar than the others, but it offers an interesting variation on our third theme, the inequality of men.

The more wit we have, the more people we find original. Ordinary people find no difference between men.

* * *

What a chimaera then is man! What a novelty, what a monster, what a chaos, what a mass of contradictions, what a prodigy! Judge of all things and imbecile earthworm, trustee of truth and sewer of uncertainty and error, glory and scum of the universe.

* * *

Man is but a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but a thinking reed. It does not need the whole universe to arm itself to crush him; a vapor, a drop of water, is enough to kill him. But though the universe should crush him, man would still be nobler than his destroyer, because he knows he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of that.

All dignity then consists in thought. Through this we must raise ourself and not through space or time which we can never fill. Let us then exert ourselves to think well. That is the first principle of morality.

* * *

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

* * *

Imagine a number of men in chains, all condemned to death and some slaughtered daily in the sight of the rest, and those who are left reading their own fate in that of their fellows, looking at each other in sorrow and without hope while waiting their turn. That is the image of man's lot.*

The last four notes are clearly variations on our first theme. Man is wretched and ephemeral, but . . . Pascal did not bring anything very new to this theme except for his haunting images and his brilliant rhetoric. But haunting images are not to be disparaged.

20

Among Nietzsche's posthumously published fragments, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" occupies a special place.** Written in 1873, the year after he had published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, this fragment seems closer in style as well as thought to the books of Nietzsche's maturity than to his first effort. But although the essay starts off brilliantly, Nietzsche neither finished it nor used parts of it in one of his later books. He could easily have found a place for the most striking passages in *Human, All Too Human*, in *The Dawn*, or in *The Gay Science*, but must have felt that they did not entirely reflect the views that he wished to publish. In this respect the fragment invites comparison with the passages quoted from Pascal's *Pensées*, for Pascal, too, might well have revised his material before giving it to the public.

In a more profound way, the opening of "On Truth and Lie" not only invites comparison with Pascal's celebrated answer to the question, What is man? but was almost certainly inspired by it and directed against it. Nietzsche cited the *Pensées* in his second book, and in *Human, All Too Human* (section 282) he deplored that Pascal was not read more widely. In the final aphorism of the sequel he declared that there were eight men, including Pascal, with whom he had to come to terms again and again.

Whatever I say, decide, or think for myself and others, I fix my eyes upon these eight men and feel that their eyes are upon me.

Nor did Nietzsche outgrow this fascination with Pascal. There are actually more references to him in Nietzsche's later writings than during the period considered so far. In the selection from his late notes that was published posthumously as *The Will to Power*, for example, we encounter more than twenty references to Pascal.

For Nietzsche's considered views, of course, we have to turn to the books he himself completed. But in a collection of touchstones, the beginning of the fragment "On Truth and Lie" merits a place alongside Pascal's aphorism on man as a thinking reed.

* Brunschvicg edition, #7, 434, 347, 206, 199 = Lafuma edition, 981, 246, 391, 392, 314.

** The quoted passage comes from the partial translation in *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 42ff.

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of "world history"—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his action and thoughts.

It is strange that this should be the effect of the intellect, for after all it was given only as an aid to the most unfortunate, most delicate, most evanescent beings in order to hold them for a minute in existence, from which otherwise, without this gift, they would have every reason to flee as quickly as Lessing's son. That haughtiness which goes with knowledge and feeling, which shrouds the eyes and senses of man in a blinding fog, therefore deceives him about the value of existence by carrying in itself the most flattering evaluation of knowledge itself. Its most universal effect is deception; but even its most particular effects have something of the same character.

The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual, unfolds its chief powers in simulation; for this is the means by which the weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves, since they are denied the chance of waging the struggle for existence with horns or the fangs of beasts of prey. In man this art of simulation reaches its peak: here deception, flattery, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing, living in borrowed splendor, being masked, the disguise of convention, acting a role before others and before oneself—in short, the constant fluttering around the single flame of vanity is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure urge for truth could make its appearance among men.

A careful account of Nietzsche's conception of man or a survey of all the relevant passages in his writings would require a monograph and has no place here. Nietzsche saw himself as the first great psychologist among philosophers, and his whole philosophy is relevant to our question, his reflections on the nature of knowledge no less than his essays on art and morals, on religion, Wagner, and himself. Similarly, one could claim that all of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies and histories, as well as his sonnets, are relevant to our question. But instead of solving this problem in the way we followed in Shakespeare's case, selecting some of the most memorable passages from several great works, it may be better in Nietzsche's case to pick five very short quotations from what he himself considered his most profound book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.*

Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?

* * *

Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping.

* * *

Man is something that must be overcome; and therefore you shall love your virtues, for you will perish of them.

* * *

"The earth," he said, "has a skin, and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called 'man.'"

* * *

Man is the cruelest animal. At tragedies, bullfights, and crucifixions he has so far felt best on earth; and when he invented hell for himself, behold, that was his heaven on earth. When the great man screams, the small man comes running with his tongue hanging from lasciviousness. But he calls it his "pity."

* Prologue, section 3 and 4; Part I, Chapter 5; II, 18; and III, 13, section 2 = *Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 124, 126f., 149, 242, 330.

The last quotation is readily assimilated to our third theme, that man is a wolf to man. And it seems clear that Nietzsche is far from applauding this inhumanity. Not only is our final quotation unambiguous, unlike some other passages in Nietzsche that have led careless readers astray, but the context provided by the motif "Man is something that shall be overcome" places the wolf theme in a clear and revealing light.

For a generation it was considered a commonplace that the motif that man must be overcome was Darwinian. Speaking of his concept of the overman, which is introduced in the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—and our first two quotations come from sections 3 and 4 of the Prologue—Nietzsche said near the beginning of the third chapter of *Ecce Homo*, "scholarly oxen have suspected me of Darwinism on that account. Even the 'hero worship' of that unconscious and involuntary counterfeiter, Carlyle, which I have repudiated so maliciously, has been read into it." As often, Nietzsche had really invited the misunderstanding that he then took pains to repudiate. Some of the imagery of his Prologue was bound to be associated with Darwin by the average reader, even though Nietzsche protested repeatedly that he was not writing for average readers and that he wanted to be read with care and consideration, with an eye to the context and a regard for his earlier writings. All that was to no avail because Nietzsche's images and coinages and brilliant formulations leap from the printed page, leaving behind their context, and are remembered by millions who never read even one of his books from beginning to end.

"What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment." Naturally, the generation that read this or heard about it around the turn of the century thought of Darwin. Who to this day, excepting Nietzsche himself, thought of Heraclitus, Nietzsche's favorite among the early Greek philosophers before Socrates? Yet Heraclitus' fragments 82 and 83 (known to us because Plato quotes these sentences in the *Greater Hippias* 289) read: "The most beautiful ape is ugly compared with the human race." "The wisest of men, when compared to a god, will appear but an ape in wisdom and beauty and all else."

Nietzsche frequently expressed his love of Heraclitus and his opposition to Darwin. And yet the fragment "On Truth and Lie" reminds us poignantly how Darwin changed the whole climate of thought, and how Nietzsche grasped the most revolutionary implications for the question, What is man? long before other people did. The remark about the "scholarly oxen" is characteristically immoderate, but it must be admitted that the central thrust of the Prologue to *Zarathustra* was indeed opposed to the Darwinism that ever so many books and articles read into it. Nietzsche did not pin his hopes on the survival of the fittest but suggested, on the contrary, that what was fittest to survive was "the last man," the quintessence of mediocrity and conformity. "His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest."

Virtually everything my generation discussed, tried to think through—one might say, suffered; one might also say, spun out—had long been expressed and exhausted by Nietzsche, who had found definitive formulations; the rest was exegesis.

Thus wrote Gottfried Benn, one of Germany's best poets, in 1950. Nietzsche's vivisection of the last man is a case in point. It has been spun out—there is no exact English equivalent for Benn's far nastier term, *breitgetreten*—in Heidegger's account for the anonymous "one" and in ever so many popular sociological treatises. But in most discussions of Nietzsche one misses any sense for the central contrast in the Prologue to *Zarathustra*. He associates "the last man" with survival, and "the overman" with going under.

Indeed, the main reason for translating *Übermensch* as "overman" is that any translation of the Prologue that misses the rhapsodical play on "over" and "under," *über* and *unter*, and above all *Übermensch* and *untergehen*, comes nowhere near Nietzsche's meaning.

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*.

I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over. . . .

I love him who loves his virtue, for virtue is the will to go under and an arrow of longing.

I love him who does not hold back one drop of spirit for himself, but wants to be entirely the spirit of his virtue: thus he strides over the bridge as spirit.

I love him who makes his virtue his addiction and catastrophe: for his virtue's sake he wants to live and to live no longer. . . .

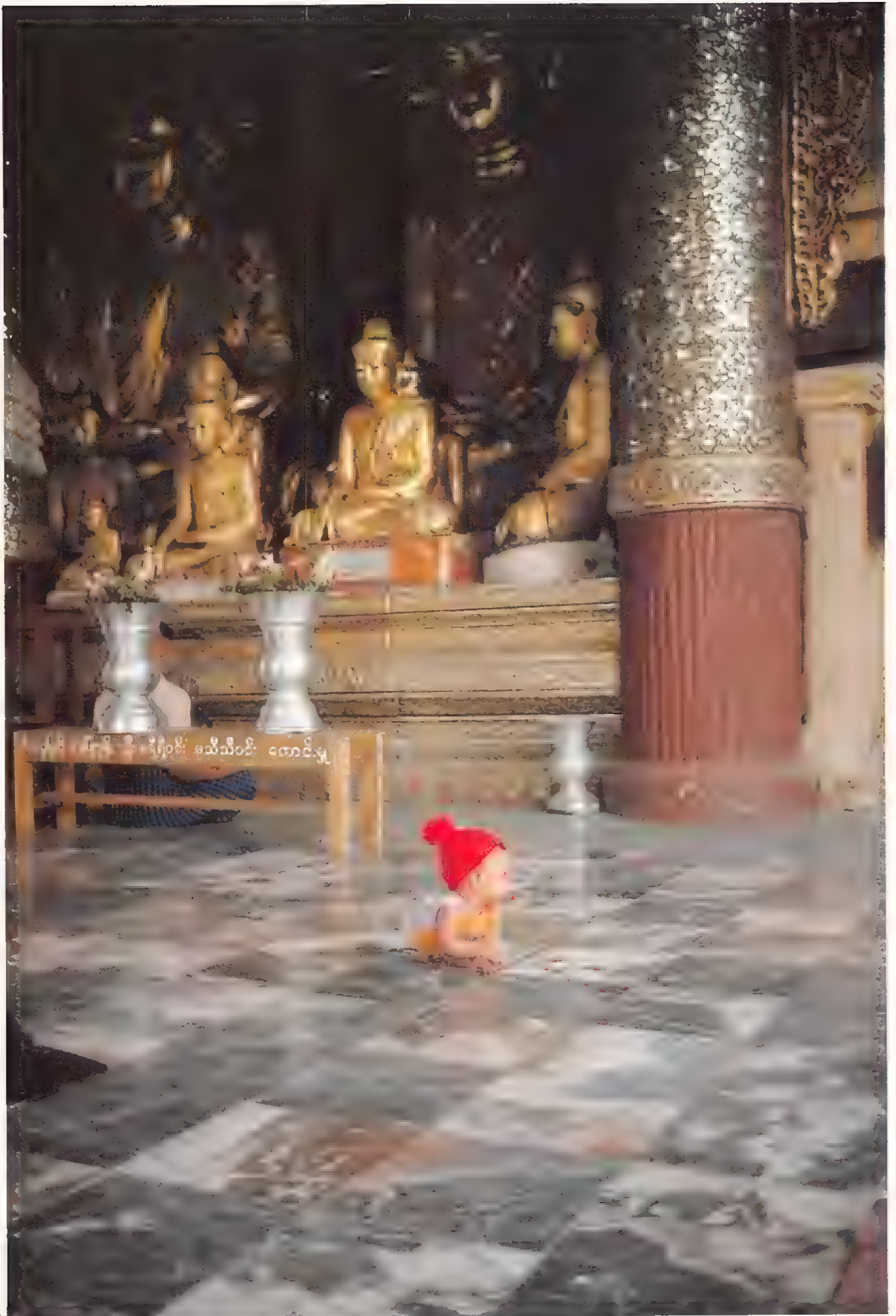
I love him whose soul squanders itself, who wants no thanks and returns none: for he always gives and does not want to preserve himself.*

What is man? Nietzsche sublimates the inegalitarian theme. He does not claim, as many people believe, who have not read him carefully, that all men are masters or slaves. He does not celebrate what he calls master morality, though he appreciates its freedom from the resentment that he finds at the heart of slave morality. He is a pluralist who admits the existence of a vast variety of types, and he scorns the Manichaeian faith in opposite values. But such passages as the one just quoted suggest that the most basic difference between men is that between those who are autonomous and those who are not. At first glance that may not seem very different from the distinction between master and slave. But those who accept the code of their class, even if it is the ruling class, are not autonomous. Moreover, those whom Nietzsche celebrates are not brutal beasts who ruthlessly sacrifice others to their own preservation, but rather those who squander and in a sense sacrifice themselves because they do not desire self-preservation.

Exemplary individuals of this kind are not members of one race, class, or people, but exceptions wherever they occur—an artist here, a philosopher there. A romantic theme? Yes. But Nietzsche himself made a sharp distinction in later works between "romantic" and "Dionysian." He reserved the word "romantic" for the weak who pine for fulfillment, and he called those who create out of fullness and squander themselves "Dionysian."

What is man? As Nietzsche sees it, there are many things all men have in common, but what is most interesting and promising is what is found only in a few exceptions.

* Prologue, section 4.





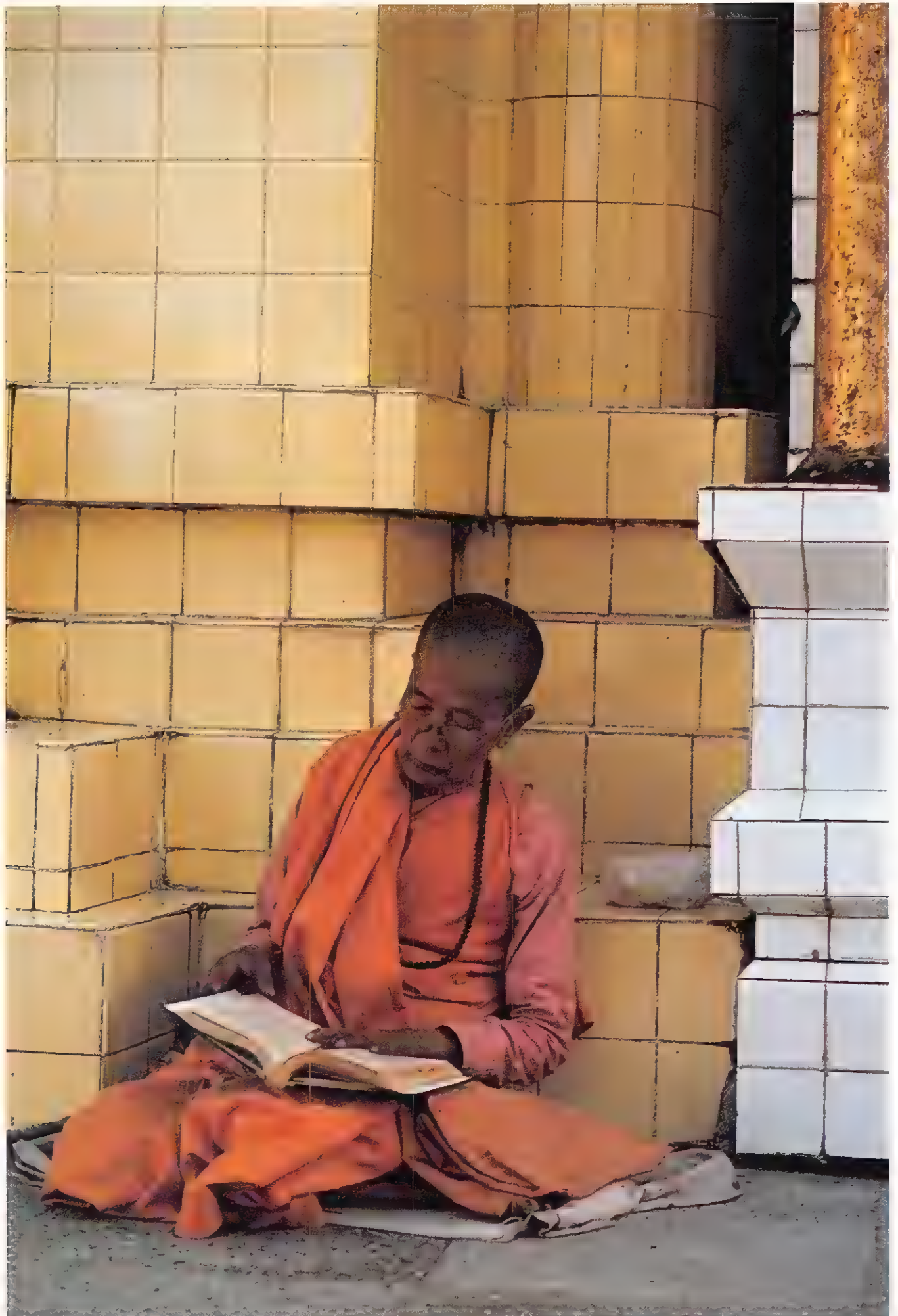
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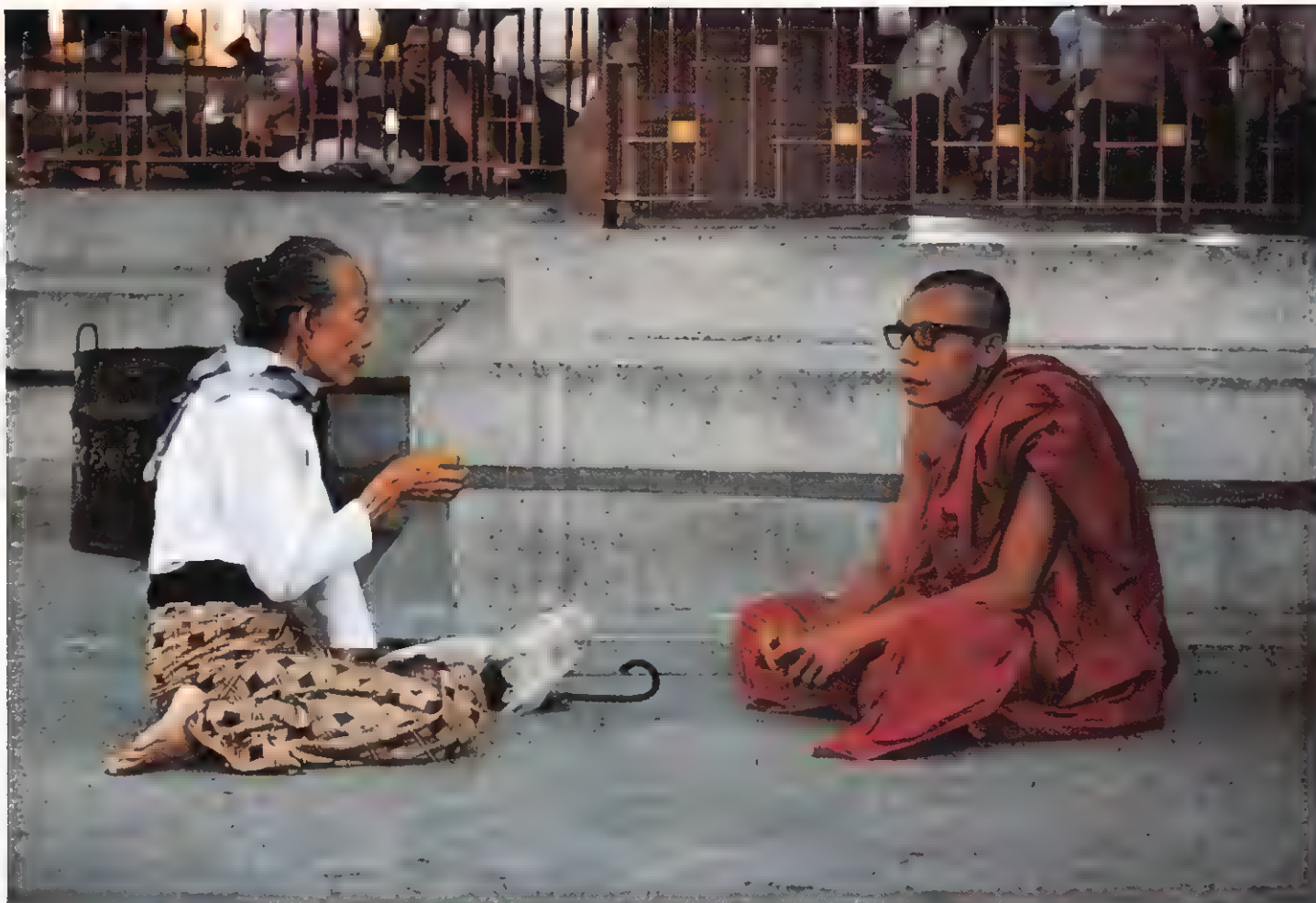
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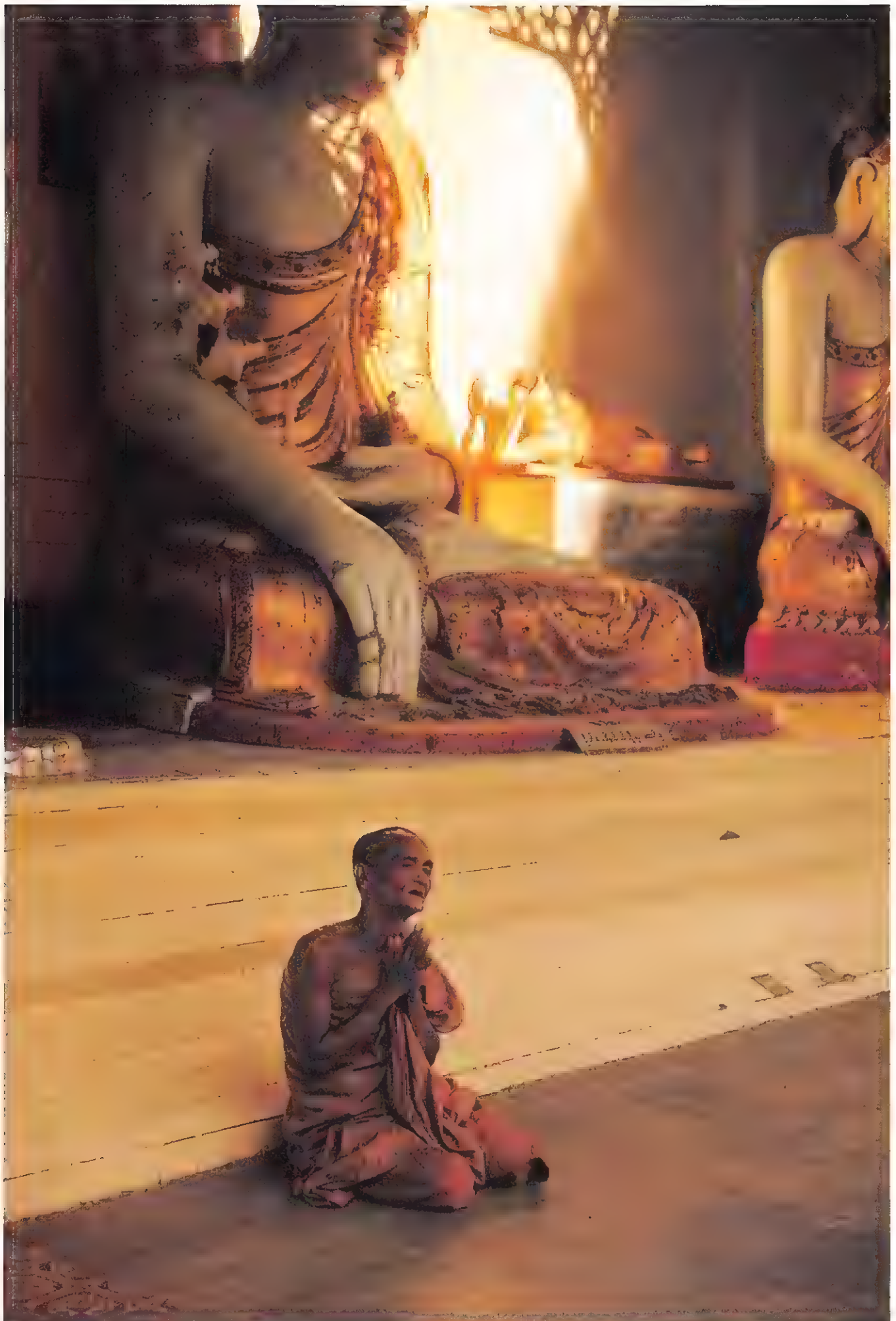




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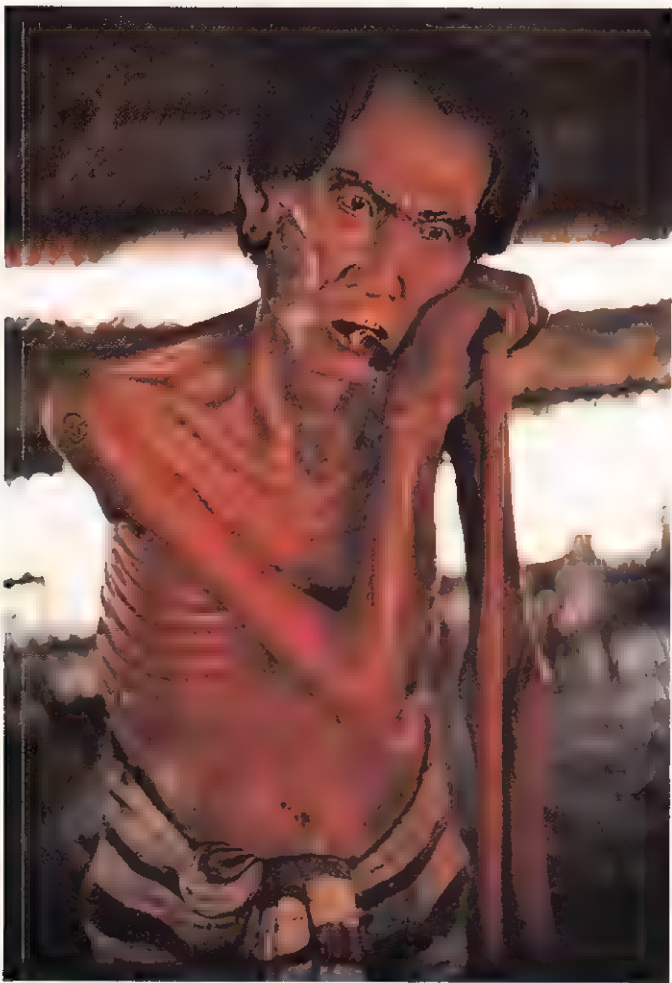
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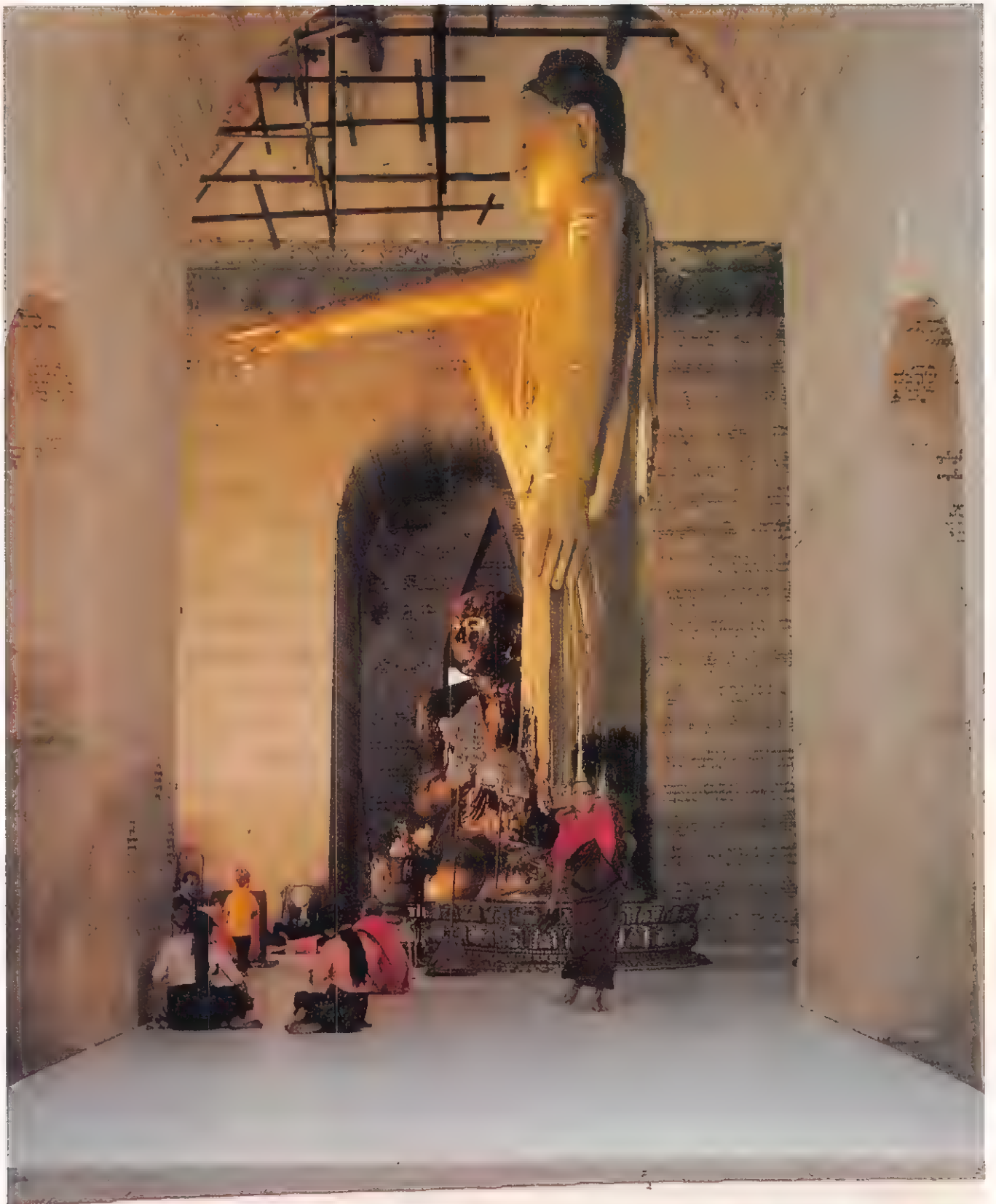
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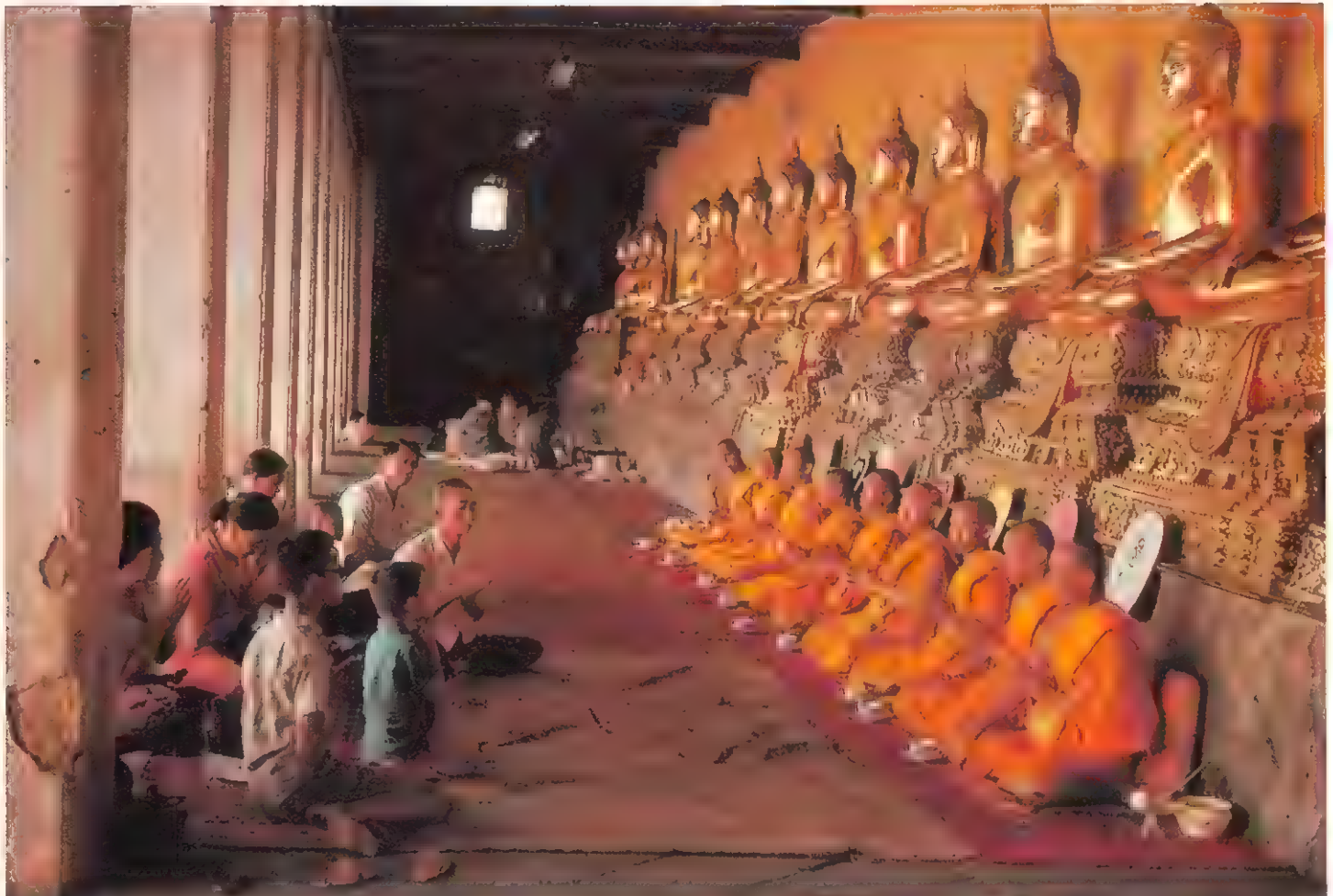
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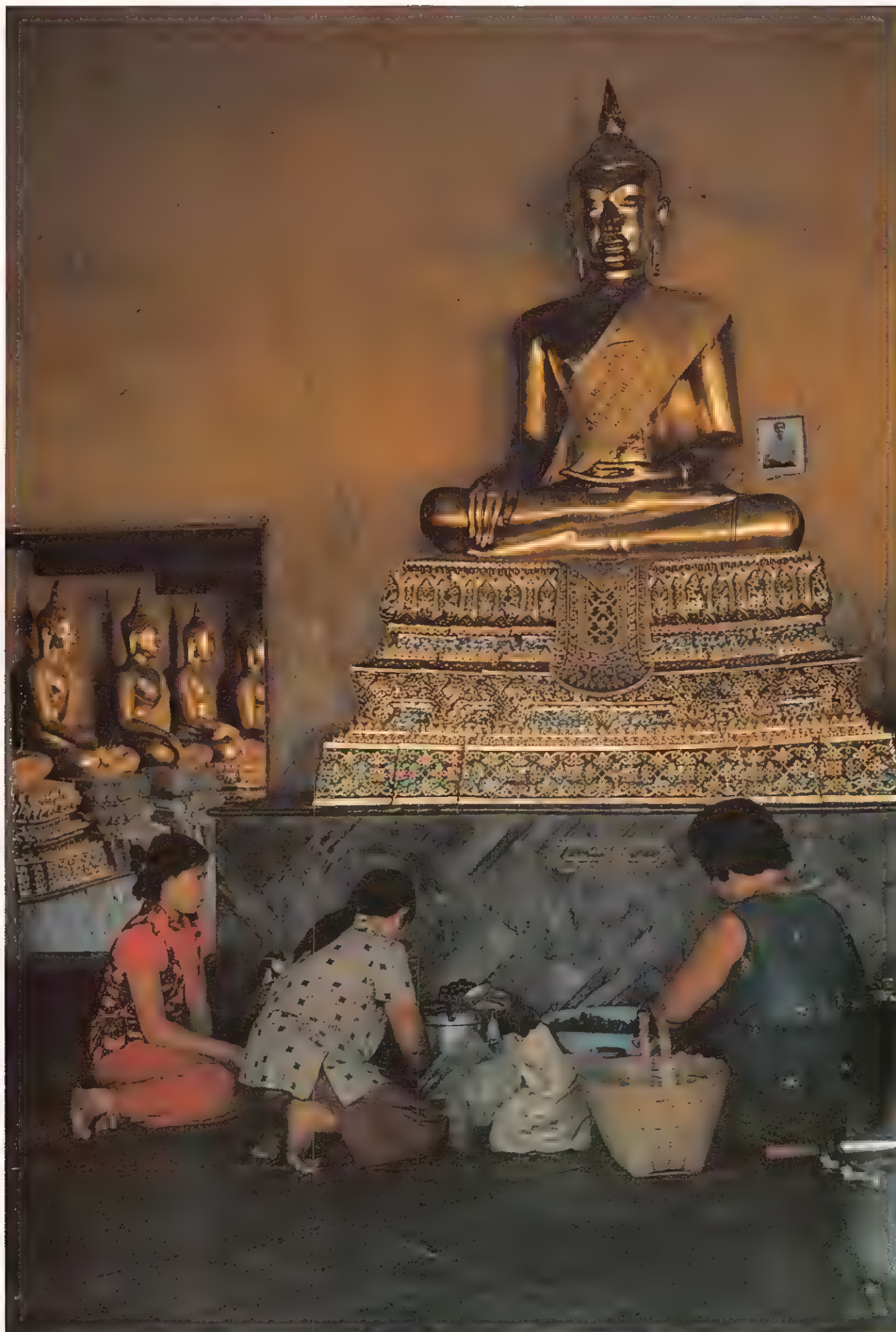
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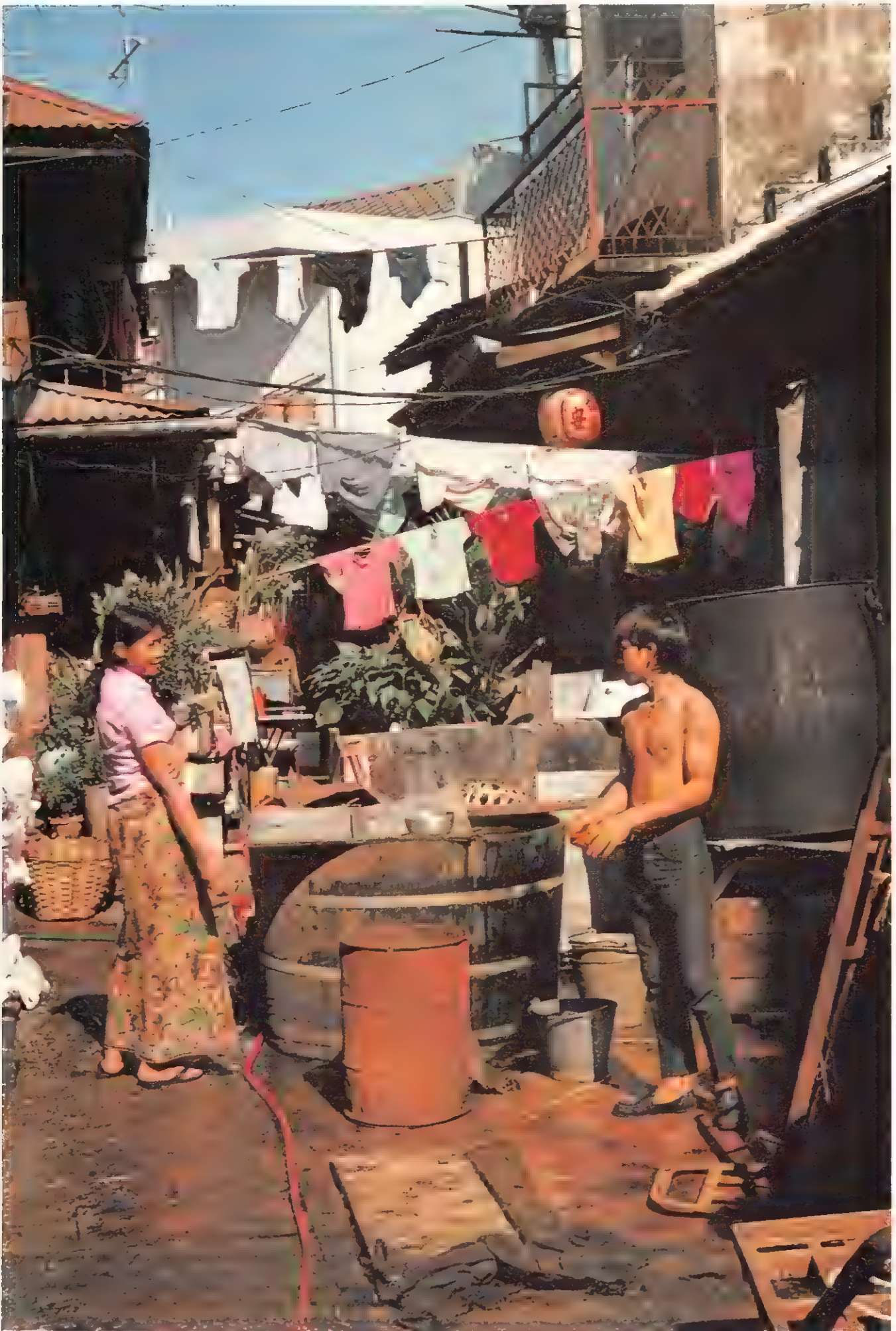


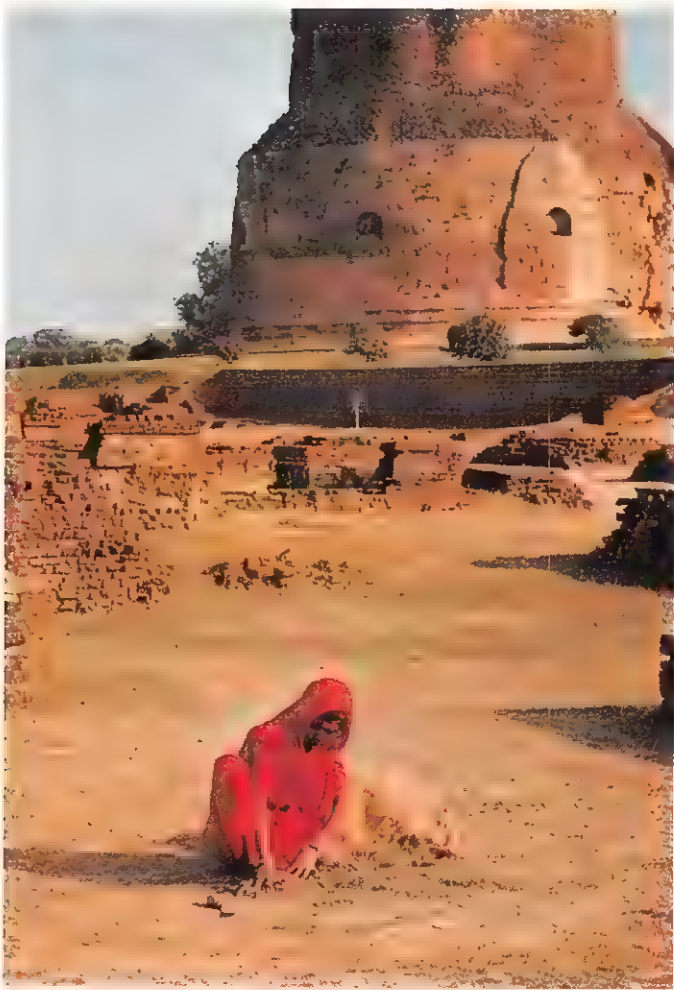
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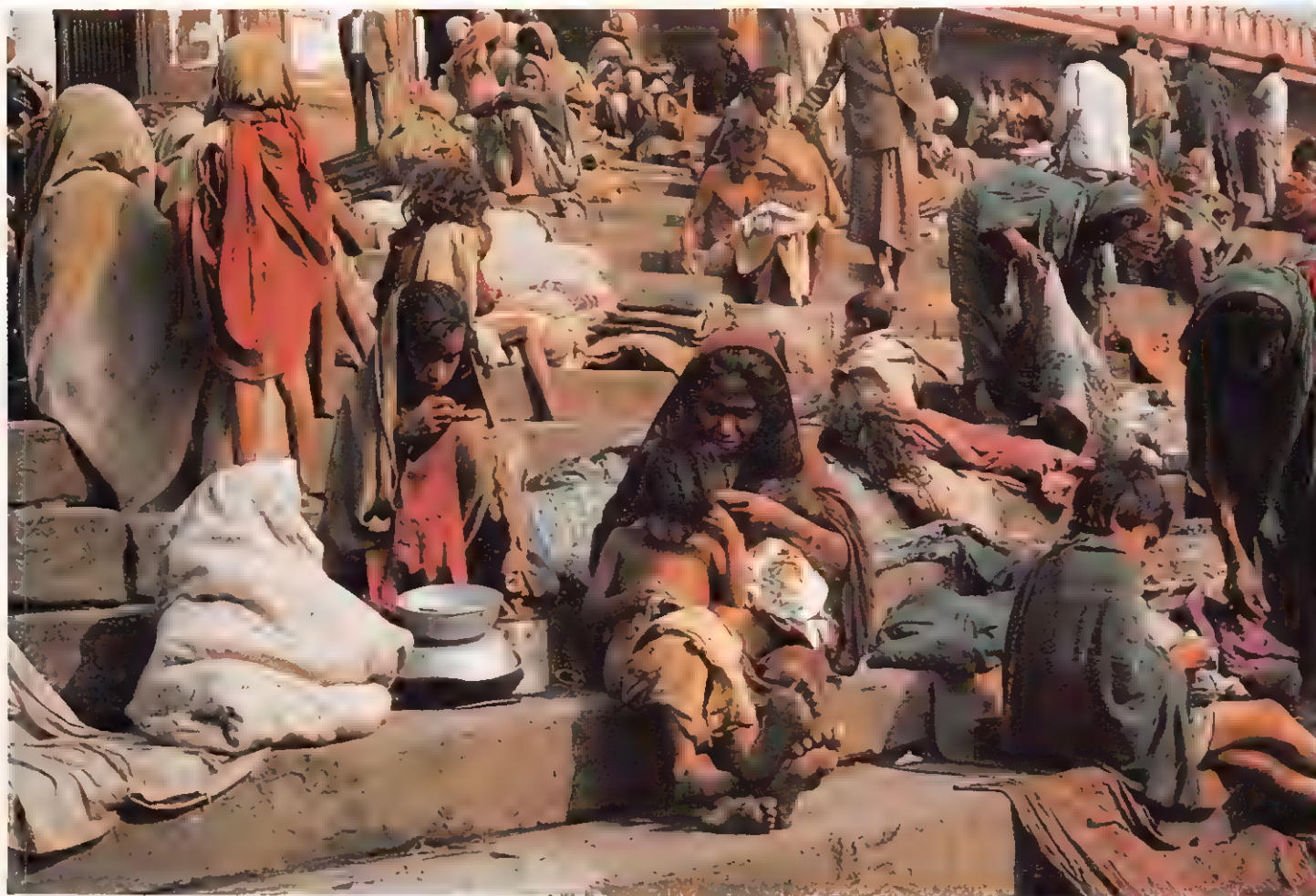
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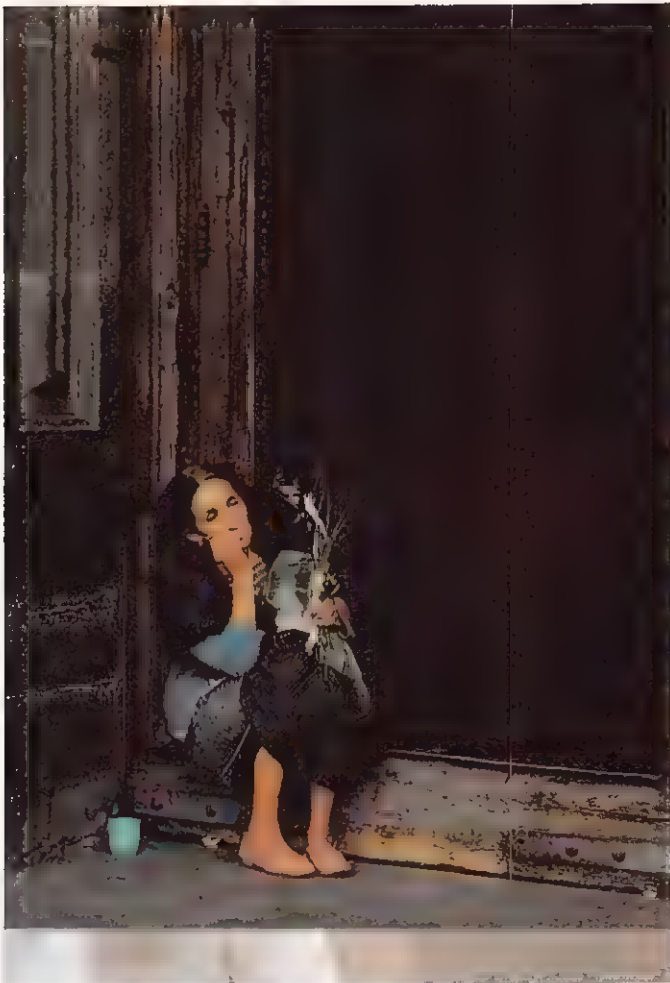
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V

ECCE HOMO

21

Paradigmatic individuals change our perception of what it means, or could mean, to be human. Such individuals are found more often in literature than in real life. It could even be argued that they are found only in literature. There is no lack of people who make a great impression on their contemporaries—usually for a rather short period of time. Those who remain impressive and change people's conception of what man is are known through literature—through what they write or what others write about them. This is true of men of action and artists no less than of writers.

If Winston Churchill influenced man's perception of man it was through his speeches after the fall of France. Lincoln is known to us through his speeches and through what others have written; Vincent van Gogh through his letters; Rembrandt through biographies.

Since "paradigmatic individuals" make a difference not only for a short while, but remain reference points for generations and for people in different parts of the world, it follows that, even if they really lived, it is in literature that we encounter them. Only in the twentieth century has technology devised alternative media, notably sound films and videotapes.

Still, most of the most paradigmatic individuals are encountered neither through what they themselves wrote nor through reports whose primary aim it is to tell us how things actually happened, but through works of the highest literary quality. The greatest collection of such individuals to be found in any single culture is found in a single book, the Old Testament.

22

Adam is *the* paradigm. He is man, and his story is the story of man. Reading about Adam, we learn that man was created in the image of God, that he was taken from dust and will return to dust, that God breathed his spirit into him, that man and woman wished to be like God, knowing good and evil, but that man and woman are mortal. No enumeration of points is a substitute for the story which is, like other Biblical tales, inexhaustible.

Cain, Adam's son, appears in one chapter, a single page in length, and then is heard of no more in the Hebrew Bible; yet he, too, is a paradigmatic individual. The point is not that we can see him that way, but rather that this is what he *is*. The worst feature of a narrow fundamentalism or literalism is that it fails to see this. By supposing that the Bible tells us merely what happened once, literally, it misses out on the symbolic or paradigmatic significance of the text. Cain's retort to God, who asks him after he has slain Abel, "Where is Abel, your brother?" resounds through the ages and has always been felt to be paradigmatic: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yet one cannot say that it leaps out of the context, for the whole story has this quality.

The Hebrew Bible is so full of individuals who have shaped man's conception of man wherever the influence of the Bible has reached—and that means not only the worlds of Judaism and Christianity but also, though to a lesser extent, the world of Islam—that one simply cannot deal briefly with all of the examples. What is crucial is that reflections on what man is should not stop short of recognizing the significance of these figures.

In the Book of Genesis, Noah, the three patriarchs, and Joseph are clearly cases in point; but Noah and Isaac are less striking individuals than Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. Abraham first appears in Chapter 11, and his death is recorded in Chapter 25. He does not come to life as an individual the way Jacob does, nor does anybody in world literature before Jacob. (On this point, see *Time Is an Artist*, section 18, where it is shown how Jacob is the first example in world literature of character development.)

In a very brief space it may be permissible to single out two high points in the story of Abraham. His calling is haunting:

Go away from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great people and will bless you and make great your name, and you shall be a blessing.

In Genesis, sentence after sentence could be said to leap from the page if it were not for the fact that the whole page leaps from the book, and the whole book is not only about the Jews and their ancestors but about man.

Man is not defined by his country and kindred and father's house, but can leave all that behind and venture on new paths. He can "live dangerously," in Nietzsche's phrase, and obtain not only a great name but even become a blessing for others.

The last part of Chapter 18 similarly changes one's conception of what a man can do. God tells Abraham how grave the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are, and Abraham challenges God:

Would you destroy the just with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty who are just . . . Shame on you if you did such a thing, killing the just with the wicked . . . Shame on you! Should the judge of the whole earth not do right?

Here living dangerously acquires a new dimension. Abraham, having refused to be bound by his country and kindred and his own father, will not truckle even to God.

The argument continues. After God has agreed to spare the whole place for the sake of fifty, if there are fifty, Abraham begins anew:

See, I have dared to speak to the Lord although I am dust and ashes. Perhaps five of these fifty just people are lacking. Would you destroy the whole city for the lack of five?

He is dust and ashes, and the tension of the situation depends on that. The overwhelming inequality of God and man is presupposed. That Abraham dares to argue with God like this must be seen against this background. There is a touch of humor in the argument which naturally brings to mind the haggling over a purchase, as Abraham finally gets God to concede: "I will not destroy it for the sake of ten." The incongruity is heightened by the fact that God, of course, knows all along that there are not even ten; but eventually he leads Lot and his family out of the city before destroying it. To speak of a whimsical touch would be much too strong, nor is the relationship between God and Abraham one of intimacy. It is more intimate than the relationship between God and man in Christianity or Islam, but infinitely less intimate than that between Zeus and the women he loves. Man is implicitly defined by the enormous tension that finds expression in the word, "See, I have dared to speak to the Lord although I am dust and ashes." God is the judge of the whole earth and can destroy a whole city at will. Man is as nothing compared to him and can nevertheless have the courage to reflect critically on God.

If we demythologize the story and distill from it its anthropological meaning, it is easily assimilated to our first theme: Man is not much, and yet . . . Clearly, this is a variation on our first theme, but the variation is significant. It does not come down to Plato's, "Men's doings are not worthy of great seriousness, and yet we are compelled to take them seriously, and that is unfortunate." In Genesis, men's doings have considerable weight because man, though formed from the earth to which he will return, has been made in God's image and breathes God's spirit. The unique dignity that is implicit in this conception did not remain to be spelled out by later generations of philosophers or theologians; it was made flesh in the Hebrew Bible itself, in one individual after another. As Nietzsche once put it:

In the Jewish "Old Testament" . . . there are human beings, things, and speeches in so grand a style that Greek and Indian literature have nothing to compare with it. One stands with awe and reverence before these tremendous remnants of what man once was and has sad thoughts about ancient Asia and its protruding little peninsula Europe, which wants

by all means to signify as against Asia the "progress of man." . . . the taste for the Old Testament is a touchstone for "great" and "small" . . . (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 52).

When Nietzsche went on to compare the New Testament very unfavorably with the Old, he harked back, without knowing it, to Michelangelo's explanation for his refusal to paint the twelve apostles on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: because they were wretches (*perchè furon poveri anche loro*). This quotation and Michelangelo's visual recreation of the spirit of the Hebrew Bible are discussed in *Life at the Limits*. And in section 18 of *Time Is an Artist* it is shown how Jacob is a paradigmatic figure, and how his nocturnal fight with God, after which his name is changed to Israel, consummates the development we have followed from Adam through Abraham.

23

While Jacob dominates the second half of Genesis, Moses dominates the other four books of the Torah, or Pentateuch: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. His character, like Jacob's, develops, and he confronts us not as a type but as a flesh-and-blood individual. What *he* shows us cannot be subsumed under one of our three themes. The story of Moses enlarges our imagination by exhibiting what man can make of man—of himself and of his fellowmen. That he is a self-made man, the son of ordinary people, a fugitive, a shepherd who rises to become the leader of his people and a legislator, is the least of it. After all, he does not aspire to become a king, nor is he intent on fame or glory. Exactly three thousand years later, a Prussian king who was fired by the desire for fame and glory and waged wars to attain them, Frederick the Great, said repeatedly that he considered himself "the first servant of his state." In an age of absolute monarchies, Moses sought nothing for himself: no throne, no adulation, no monuments. He bent all his efforts to serve, or rather remake, his people.

Confronted with slaves, he sought to make them free—not merely free like all the other nations who, even if not enslaved by foreigners, were still the slaves of pharaohs or kings, but free in a kingless, classless society in which every man was called upon to be holy as God is holy, and to remember that man has been made in the image of God.

More than any individual before or after him, Moses revolutionized man's image of man. He transcends our first theme by not saying either that man is not much or that he is a prodigy. Men's doings *are* worthy of great seriousness, but not on account of what he *is*, and much less on account of his achievements. The feats recited by the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone* are not to the point. What matters is not what man is or is not, but what he could and should *become*, his potentialities. Again, the challenge issued by Moses, not only in so many words but also in the flesh, aims not at more impressive exploits than anything yet seen, but at man's character and his way of life. Moses was afraid of no man and subservient to none; he gave his whole life to service and devotion, to instilling pride and dignity into slaves. "The man Moses was very humble, more than all men that were on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12.3), yet none surpassed him in dignity; he was longsuffering—his patience was legendary—yet awesome in his wrath. He was self-effacing and commanded man, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19). But when Nietzsche's Zarathustra said (in section 4 of "On Old and New Tablets"), "Thus my great love of the farthest demands it: *Do not spare your neighbor!* Man is something that must be overcome," he was merely spelling out what Moses had taught by his sublime example.

Even Nietzsche's most daring attack on love of the neighbor, in Zarathustra's discourse "On the Pitying," joins no issue with Moses but could serve as the motto for Moses' life:

All great love is even above all its pity; for it still wants to create the beloved.
"Myself I sacrifice to my love, and my neighbor as myself"—thus runs the speech of all creators. But all creators are hard.

Like no man before him and probably no one after him, Moses did not only love his people but wished to create them, to make a people of them, a free people who would be very dif-

ferent from the men and women among whom he lived. Fired by the will to recreate them in his image, he kept them in the desert forty years.

When only two of those he led
from slavery survived, and all
the others had been born and bred
under the challenge of his call—

triumphant past imaginings,
he blessed them and soared out of sight,
sailing on undiminished wings,
and died, an eagle in his flight.*

He died in the desert, opposite Jericho, after beholding the promised land from a mountain top, and "No man knows the place where he lies buried. . . . His eye had not grown dim and his strength not abated." He died as he had lived, a leader of men who spurned adulation and monuments, a man who would not genuflect before another human being, let alone an animal or statue, and who tried to mold his people in his likeness.

In Egypt the pharaoh was considered divine, even during the reign of Akhenaton, who has often been labeled a monotheist. How easy it would have been for Moses to tell his people, or at least to intimate to some of his followers, that he was divine! It was infinitely more difficult to create the image he did leave with them: that of a man who ages in the service of his fellow-men whom he is trying to change against impossible odds; a man whose anger flares up in his youth so that he kills a man scourging a slave; a fugitive who learns patience and modesty; a leader who boldly stands up to pharaoh and leads his people from slavery; a legislator who communicates God's will to man and stands up to God, too, again and again.

When God's wrath flares up against the children of Israel and he wants to destroy them and make a great people of Moses, Moses replies that then the Egyptians will exult and Israel's enemies will say, "Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he promised them, he slaughtered them in the desert." As for the offer made to him, Moses pretends not to have heard it, as if it were an attempt to bribe him: "And now, if you would only forgive their sin! But if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."***

Moses was so successful in teaching his people that a man is a man for all that, and no god, that they never sainted or worshiped him. They did not even pit him against the men whom other religions deified, to make out a case that, simply as a human being, he is at least as admirable as Confucius or Lao-tze, the Buddha or Jesus—if not more so. Of course, it would be idle to try to rank exemplary human beings. What matters is that Moses changed the meaning of man. Anyone who has felt a breath of his spirit, and that means most of mankind, will have an altogether different notion of what man is than was possible before Moses.

24

The Hebrew Bible is full of exemplary men and women, but one could say that Moses is the text and the rest is exegesis. Still, it may be helpful to at least mention five others briefly.

Samson at first glance seems to be a mere folk hero, a man of prodigious strength who performs unheard of feats but is vulnerable in one way that becomes his undoing. The way the story is told in the Book of Judges is gripping and beautiful, but the man himself grows to towering stature only in death. He becomes the first suicide in the Hebrew Bible, and he is not condemned for that any more than the other three. Even the New Testament did not censure suicide, and certainly the Romans did not. The notion that it is a heinous sin is a product of the Dark Ages.

Samson's suicide is considered in *Time Is an Artist*. Blinded by his enemies, a captive reduced to slavery, Samson refuses to resign himself to hopeless drudgery. After calling on God, he breaks the columns supporting the roof under which his tormentors have gathered for a festival and make sport of him, and "the dead he slew dying exceeded those he had slain living."

What is man? A being that can triumph over desperate conditions by choosing to die—and how to die.

* The last two stanzas of "Moses" in Kaufmann's *Cain and Other Poems*.

** Exodus 32, Numbers 14, Deuteronomy 9.

25

Saul's suicide is considered in *Life at the Limits* in connection with Bruegel's painting of it. (The other two suicides in the Hebrew Bible, that of Saul's armor-bearer and Ahitophel's in Second Samuel, are less haunting than Saul's and Samson's.) Saul, like Jacob and Moses, is a character who develops through a long and eventful life, and it is by no means only his death that makes him exemplary.

Saul introduces into the human imagination the poetry of melancholy and of madness that is soothed by music. As a literary figure, he transcends the Manichaean notion that those God abandons are his wicked foes. He acquaints us with the anguish of a man once chosen to be king, a hero who unites his people and seems sure of gratitude and a great place in history, but who then is dropped in favor of a younger man. The prophet who anointed him denounces him for sparing a captured king, and Saul, more merciful and more humane than God's prophet, Samuel, does not cease to stir our sympathy.

The stories of Saul and David are intertwined in the Bible. Young David playing the harp eases Saul's depression, and Samuel anoints David to succeed Saul. Saul is the first king of a people who reject the kingship of God and want a human king "like all the nations." David, the second king, permanently changes man's conception of kingship. Though a great king by any standard, he is always a human being first, and as memorable a father and a poet as he is a ruler and general.

No other character in the Bible is portrayed in such intimate detail. Even more than Jacob, we see him develop before our eyes, and in his poetry we hear him speak himself. Compared to his elegy on the death of Saul and his son Jonathan, who had been David's closest friend, Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats" seem intolerably long-winded. In these nine verses in the opening chapter of Second Samuel, David set a standard for poetry and humanity. So much poetry of this kind is vanity, infatuation with one's own art for which a friend's death provides an occasion. David's is the cry of a wounded heart.

People have commented on the fact that in ancient Hebrew poetry many feelings are expressed twice in an artful parallelism. They have forgotten to count how often the same points are expressed by Milton or Shelley, not to speak of lesser poets. And they have failed to note how David's poem has been cut to the bone, how free it is of rhetorical embellishments, how close it comes to David's reaction to the death of Absalom, the son who had risen up against him to take his throne from him: "My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died for you, Absalom, my son, my son!" (18.33; 19.1 in the Hebrew original).

David gives us a new image of what man can be. One might have thought that a great poet and a great king represent two incompatible paradigms.

Twentieth century archaeologists discovered the art of Akhenaton's reign and also a hymn to the sun that may have been composed by the royal heretic himself. We know how the pharaoh, his wife Nefertiti, his mother Tiye, and his royal father Amenophis III, looked, and we also have portraits of his children and some of his courtiers; but of his life before his reign we know nothing, and his poem is a hymn to the sun god and not a reaction to events in his life. Unquestionably, he, too, is a paradigmatic figure, and a picture of a portrait head of his mother is included in *Life at the Limits*. But historians cite Akhenaton in support of the view that a poetic soul makes a poor king and claim that his reign was disastrous for his country.

David set a standard by which all the other great kings of mankind stand condemned. The Hohenstauffen emperor Frederick II (reigned 1215-50) and the Hohenzollern king Frederick II (reigned 1740-86) are among the few whom one might at least think of comparing with David, and they certainly were fascinating men and rulers of exceptional ability, but neither their poetry nor their humanity fares well when seen in this perspective.

26

There is a central theme that recurs in the stories of Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Samson, Saul and David: man's growth through suffering. This is one of the most important legacies of the Hebrew Bible and as important as the three themes we explored earlier.

There are two paradigmatic figures in the Hebrew Bible who vary and enrich this theme. The suffering servant in Isaiah 53 is enigmatic. We do not know whom the prophet was portraying, nor do we know anything about the prophet except that Bible scholars are almost unanimous

that he wrote during the period when Cyrus of Persia brought an end to the Babylonian exile of the Jews, around 538 before our era. The writer, then, is supposed to be the same who wrote, "All flesh is grass." Many Christians have taken the portrait of the suffering servant for a prophecy of Jesus, while many scholars believe that in some passages the evangelists assimilated Jesus to the paradigm of the suffering servant.

Despised and shunned by men,
a man of suffering, familiar with sickness,
people hid their faces from him,
he was despised and we thought him of no account.
Yet it was our sickness he bore
and our suffering that he endured.
We thought him afflicted,
smitten by God and debased.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities,
the punishment upon him was for our good,
and with his stripes we were healed.
All of us went astray like sheep,
each in his own way,
while the Lord laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and debased
and did not open his mouth,
like a lamb led to the slaughter
and like a sheep that is silent before his shearers
and did not open his mouth.

The Book of Job also opposes the widespread view, held by Job's friends as well as generations of Christian theologians and Hindus, that suffering proves guilt. Job, we are told at the outset, is flawless, and in the end the Lord himself confirms this twice and rebukes Job's friends.

There is a widespread human tendency to shun and despise the afflicted and to rationalize such inhumanity by claiming that they deserve what they got. Job and the suffering servant suggest powerfully that this is wrong.

Thus the Hebrew Bible pioneers a different conception of suffering and a compassionate attitude toward the afflicted, as well as a new image of man. It offers us an imposing variety of great human beings, and we can distill a few themes from these inspired portraits.

Man lives at the mercy of the unforeseen, and the most admirable human beings can be struck by disease, misfortune, and pain. But man can rise to great heights not only if he has great luck but also through suffering, and sometimes even when despair has closed in and there seems to be no way out. He can rise above his circumstances, leave father and mother, live dangerously, and when all else fails, he can choose to die—and how to die.

27

Greek literature abounds in unforgettable men and women, but most of them have not wrought any profound change in man's conception of man. In the *Iliad*, Achilles comes closest to doing this by virtue of his explicit preference for a brief but glorious life to a longer but undistinguished life.

In Greek tragedy we find a number of imposing women who show us how women need not resign themselves to a sheltered and drab existence. Clytemnestra is the outstanding example in Aeschylus; Antigone, Deianira, and Electra overshadow their sisters in Sophocles; and in Euripides one may think of Alcestis and Medea, Phaedra and Iphigenia, to name but a few. Of all these marvelously drawn figures none has cast a greater spell on posterity than Antigone, who decides to bury her brother in direct defiance of Creon, the ruler of Thebes. Lecturing on the history of philosophy, Hegel once called "the heavenly Antigone the most glorious figure ever to have appeared on earth."^{*} Yet it was not really from her that even her admirers learned that a human being can and sometimes should defy a ruler even at the risk of death. The few who learned this lesson learned it from the Hebrew Bible, in which the defiance of kings in the name of a higher law is a frequent occurrence.

^{*} *Werke*, ed. Glockner, Vol. XVIII, p. 114.

What we need is not a catalogue but an understanding of a few of the most striking figures who have left a lasting imprint on our thinking about man. Hence it may suffice to consider the three greatest examples: Aeschylus' Prometheus, Sophocles' Oedipus, and Plato's Socrates.

Of Aeschylus' Prometheus trilogy we have only the first play, and Prometheus is not a human being but a Titan. Nevertheless, we cannot help identifying with the crucified hero who hurls his defiance at the great god who torments him. Being a Titan, he is immortal and not dust and ashes, and he shows no respect for gods but eases his anguish with impassioned blasphemies of such magnificence that he conquers new realms for poetry and for the human imagination. Never before had the refusal to bow before wanton, vastly superior power gained such expression; never before had torture failed so abysmally to achieve its purpose.

A cynic may wonder whether all this was really felt before the romantic period, two and a quarter millennia later. Certainly, Christians did not feel it, *but in Athens the gods never recovered.*

Sophocles' Oedipus is a much richer, more complex figure. While he appears in two tragedies, the second, which was the poet's last play and first performed after his death, never even approximated the immense impact of the first, and we can confine ourselves to the earlier play. Oedipus is presented as the wisest of men and the first of men, yet he does not know who he is, who his parents are, who his wife is, who his children are. As king of Thebes, which is ravaged by the plague, he is told by the oracle that the plague will not cease until the murderers of the late king, the predecessor of Oedipus, have been found. He presses the inquiry, eager to stop the plague, but is thwarted again and again by others who urge him to desist from his search which will only bring him unhappiness. His contempt for those who would have him think of his happiness is outspoken, and the passionate conflicts in the tragedy are between Oedipus and those who advise him to give up his inquiry. Bit by bit the truth comes out that he himself killed the late king without knowing that the man who provoked him was king, much less that he was his father. Having wed the king's wife, he has unwittingly begotten children with his own mother, and she, realizing this before he does, hangs herself. Oedipus, when he understands all of this, clasps her brooches, blinds himself, and asks to be cast out of the city.

Some elements of this strange story are encountered as far back as Homer, but nobody had told it in anything even remotely like Sophocles' version in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, written around 425 before our era. The character of Oedipus implicit in his play is his creation, even as Aeschylus' Prometheus was the creation of Aeschylus. Here are two poets who fashioned paradigmatic figures.

Sophocles' Oedipus sublimates Achilles contempt for a long life of comfort by spurning happiness and preferring to pursue truth. He presents a new option for man, coupled with the distinct possibility that while the search for truth may well bring the seeker and all those closest to him unhappiness it may help society. It is also impressed on us that even the wisest often fail to know themselves and their parents, their spouses and children; also that man is radically insecure and the first of men may be plunged suddenly into catastrophe.

28

Socrates is known to us from a number of Plato's dialogues which differ greatly in their proximity to the historical Socrates. We also have Xenophon's memories of Socrates, a comedy by Aristophanes, references in the works of Aristotle, and the influence of the historical Socrates on the Cynics and Cyrenaics. But the paradigmatic image is Plato's portrait as found in the *Apology* and the last three pages of *Phaedo*. We need not doubt the substantial historical accuracy of the description of Socrates' death in these three pages, and the *Apology* also seems to come very close to the real Socrates, although he may not have expressed himself quite so eloquently. Alcibiades' account of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* adds a few touches, while the doctrines put into Socrates' mouth in Plato's *Republic* should almost certainly not be ascribed to the real Socrates. In sum, the paradigmatic figure is known to us largely through Plato, but there are good reasons for thinking that from his works we can cull a very accurate portrait, not least because it accords so well with his influence on such non-Platonic philosophers as the Cynics and Cyrenaics.

Socrates did not offer to teach men what man is. Faced with big questions, he claimed not to know the answers, but maintained nevertheless that the Delphic oracle had been right in pro-

claiming that he was the wisest of men, for he knew what he did not know, while others who are considered wise by themselves and others believe that they know what they do not know.

What, then, is man? A being fond of claiming he knows what he does not know; a being caught in a web of spurious knowledge; one for whom wisdom consists—or should consist—in being aware of his limits. Obviously, Socrates not only had a view of what man is but also an answer to the question what man might be or ought to be. He embodied that answer. He was a new type of man—a theologian might say, a new Adam.

Like Oedipus, he preferred seeking the truth to comfort, but he spurned heroics and did not curse others in splendid speeches, as Oedipus did. Socrates' weapon against those with whom he clashed was irony. He drew them out and took pleasure in showing how they were confused and contradicted what they themselves had said. He let them boast while he professed to be ignorant, but in the end he tried to show them that they knew even much less than he did. This search for truth through argument seemed to him to lead to happiness. He did not mean that it would lead to outward success, and so he was not refuted when those whom he had offended brought him to trial when he was seventy and he was sentenced to death. The way he lived and died gave him the happiness he sought. He spurned riches and political roles no less than comfort, and showed his admirers how a man can become independent, beholden to none, autonomous.

He was quite unlike any man whom his contemporaries had seen, and he still casts a spell over many readers of Plato. He died as content as he had been throughout his life, proud and without any fear or regrets. Though much of his life was spent in dialogue, arguing about philosophical issues, his manner was in a sense quite untheatrical and extremely unpompous. He went out of his way to be prosaic and critical, was not swayed by beautiful feelings, and did not have much feeling for art or poetry. So far from disdaining nastiness in his criticism, he sublimated the aggressiveness of the ancient heroes and found his pleasure in skillfully demolishing proud opponents.

29

One may wonder whether Socrates does not belong in the company of mythical and religious figures, and whether any "real" human being can so profoundly influence man's image of man. But at least one man whose life and thoughts are richly documented has had a comparable influence. In one comprehensive edition, Goethe's works and letters fill 143 volumes, and to this must be added the records of conversations with him that were published by others, notably but not only Eckermann, as well as other contemporary letters and reports about him. Perhaps nobody in the history of the world is better known to us.

The determination to publish everything Goethe had written and said was prompted by the impression his personality and life had made on his fellowmen. Clearly, he was not only Germany's greatest poet but also a paradigmatic human being. Nor was it mere vanity that led him to publish his correspondence with Friedrich Schiller, the poet, or to plan for the publication of his correspondence with Karl Friedrich Zelter, the composer and friend of his later years, or to sit willingly for the portrait that Eckermann created in his *Conversations with Goethe During the Last Years of His Life*. It is not so much these books that create a new image of man as it is Goethe's new image of man that led to these publications.

It would be an understatement to say that Goethe was not merely a German but a European event. He radically changed Western man's conception of the artist, and it was he more than anyone else who made men see the artist as a representative of humanity.

Although many of the world's most beautiful buildings and sculptures were created in antiquity, the names of the artists are almost always unknown in China and India, Mesopotamia and Egypt, Rome and pre-Columbian America. Only in Athens were the names remembered, beginning in the fifth century, but even here next to nothing is known of the artists except for their names. Of Phidias, who was considered the greatest artist of his time, it is related that he was taken to court and found guilty because he had included a small self-portrait in the relief of the battle with the Amazons, on the shield of his monumental statue of Pallas Athena. Five hundred years later, Seneca complained: "One venerates the images of the gods, prays to them and offers sacrifices to them, but the sculptors who have fashioned them one meets with contempt."*

* See Zilsel, 26f.

Poets had fared a little better than architects, sculptors, and painters. Even so it is noteworthy that most ancient peoples did not preserve even the names of the men who composed the great epics of antiquity. The Greeks are once again an exception, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are firmly associated with the name of Homer, who was considered the supreme poet. Yet Homer is no more than a name, and we know nothing about the man. Of Hesiod and other Greek poets who lived before the fifth century we also know little or nothing. We have some information about Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and we know that Sophocles in particular was loved by his fellow Athenians; but considering that these men lived in the full sunlight of history, in the age of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato, it is really remarkable how very little we know about them. Even the chronology of their works, which has been considered important since Goethe, is still disputed by modern scholars. It never occurred to the great Thucydides, who is still widely considered the first exemplary historian, that the works and the development of the great poets of the period, whose plays were performed in public in Athens during the Peloponnesian War, might throw some light on the war, on Athens, and on the changes that made that war memorable.

The greatest biographer of antiquity was Plutarch, who left us fifty lives of famous Greeks and Romans as well as eighteen comparative essays, always comparing Greeks and Romans. This great work was written at the beginning of the second century of our era and includes neither poets nor any other artists. What is more, at the beginning of his life of Pericles—the Athenian statesman who gave his name to the age of Phidias and Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides—Plutarch suggests that it is quite proper for us not to transfer our esteem for a work to its maker. It is reasonable, he says, to be delighted by perfumes and purple dyes while regarding dyers and perfumers as low and sordid people. In the same spirit, he relates, Alexander the Great was reproached by his father for playing a piece of music with great charm and skill when he was still a boy: "Are you not ashamed, son, to play so well?" Plutarch comments: "It is enough for a king or prince to find leisure sometimes to hear others sing, and he does the Muses amply enough honor when he merely pleases to be present while others engage in such exercises and tests of skill." No decent young man who saw a fine sculpture ever desired to be Phidias or Polycletus, nor did he "feel moved by his pleasure in their poems to wish to be an Anacreon or Philetas or Archilochus."

Here poets are specifically included along with other artists as in effect mere artisans, like perfumers and dyers. In the Christian Middle Ages this estimate was not revised upwards. On the contrary, architects and sculptors, including even men who created indubitable masterpieces, lapsed once again into anonymity and oblivion. And when the world finally produced another tragic poet who brooks comparison with the great tragic poets of Athens, after an interval of exactly two thousand years, it did not occur to his contemporaries that posterity might care to know something about his person. Shakespeare lived in London in the full glare of history, and we know a great deal about the sordid affairs at the court of Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth, but almost nothing about Shakespeare, who was one of the supreme poets of all time and wrote his finest works at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Shakespeare was ten years old when Giorgio Vasari died in Florence in 1574, and one might have supposed that Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors*, first published in 1550, had changed the situation drastically, the more so because in the second edition the author had included a number of artists who were still living. In the original edition, the only living artist whose biography was given was Michelangelo whose personality and achievements had obviously inspired the whole enterprise.

There is no evidence that Shakespeare considered his own character and life especially significant. Although he put more into his greatest plays than any audience could possibly begin to understand at a performance or two, he did not even take pains to get all of them printed accurately. Much less did he see to it that their sequence and his own development should be made clear.

In retrospect we can see that Rembrandt's self-portraits represent a truly revolutionary achievement. For the first time in human history a supreme artist created a very large body of

work—more than sixty paintings and thirty etchings, not to speak of drawings—neither in response to a commission nor for sale, but entirely for himself. Not surprisingly, these paintings include a disproportionate number of his very best, and if we had to choose between his self-portraits, his portraits of others, his group portraits, his landscapes, his animal studies, his historical, mythological, and allegorical paintings, and, finally, his Biblical pictures, it would at least make very good sense to say that, wonderful as most of them are, it is the sequence of his self-portraits that represents his most unique and stunning legacy.

Implicitly, it was Rembrandt who first showed for all who could see how wrong the ancient conceit had been that Plutarch expressed so eloquently. He showed how the artist is no mere perfumer or dye maker and that his work is not just the fruit of some special skill. He showed us the artist as a human being who develops from youth to maturity and age, changing in the course of a lifetime. Nor was Rembrandt content to capture passing moods. It has often been said that he painted himself because he lacked the money for models, and even Jakob Rosenberg of Harvard kept saying again and again in what is still widely regarded as one of the best books on Rembrandt, that his face was “vulgar.” (So, we are told, was Hendrickje Stoffels, the companion of his later years, in contrast to his wife, Saskia, who had died early.)

One might have thought—and nothing could be more relevant to the question, What is man?—that this notion of vulgarity had been made obsolete by Rembrandt’s work. Anyone who has exposed himself seriously to Rembrandt’s art should be permanently immunized against the notion that people of “humble birth” are “vulgar,” while those of higher station are not. If “vulgar” means “lacking in cultivation, perception, or taste; coarse; morally crude and undeveloped; gross,” it would really be difficult to imagine a less vulgar face than Rembrandt’s. What sense does it make to suppose that he would rather have painted men and women who had money enough to pay for their portraits or models whom he could not afford? The evidence is abundant that his face was as interesting as any he could possibly hope to find; and what he created over a period of many years was an unexampled record of the growth of an artist, the development of his perception and taste, his changing attitudes toward life, the world, and himself. There is no reason to suppose that the painter had planned it all that way from the start. Neither is there any reason to doubt that as time slowly transformed his face, he was aware of the changes and realized that each new self-portrait derived additional interest and importance from what had gone before and from what might still follow.

In most of his self-portraits, incidentally, Rembrandt does not see himself specifically as a painter. He confronts himself and us as a man. When he was in his forties, we find a new look in his eyes, a probing look by which the beholder may well feel challenged to reexamine himself and his life. It first appears in the self-portrait of 1650, now in the National Gallery in Washington. Two years later, when he was forty-six, he did the “Large Self-Portrait,” now in the Vienna Museum, which has never been surpassed by anyone, not even by Rembrandt himself. The picture is found in many books on the artist, usually only in black and white. The color reproductions in Lionello Puppi’s and Robert Wallace’s books differ considerably, as do the slides sold at various times by the Vienna Museum. Although there is very little color in this painting, no photograph seems to get it right, nor does any reproduction do justice to that look of which one might well say: Let me so live that I can confront these eyes and pass muster.

In Vienna this picture hangs in the same room with the “Little Self-Portrait” he painted later, which is much more colorful and also enormously expressive. At the age of fifty-two, Rembrandt painted the magnificent self-portrait now in the Frick Collection; the next year another one which is in the National Gallery in Washington; the following year, two which are now in the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum; and at fifty-five, the “Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul” which is in the Rijksmuseum and is reproduced in *Time Is an Artist* in black and white.

It would be easy to enlarge the list, but it seems more relevant to our central theme to note that while Rembrandt has come to be accepted as one of the greatest artists of all time, and most people would probably agree that none was greater and very few in the same league, the implications of his work have not been widely understood. The very idea that a philosopher reflecting on the question, What is man? should give much thought to Rembrandt will seem strange to many people. Yet it is no accident that the same artist who changed our conception of what man

is also contributed so much to our understanding of life at the limits and of the artistry of time. Perhaps no man before him understood so well how these three themes are related.

31

The picture of Rembrandt given here is by no means sharply at odds with the conventional wisdom about him. On the contrary, it seems rather obvious—until one begins to read the literature on Rembrandt. Under these circumstances it is almost idle to ask to what extent Goethe was influenced by Rembrandt. Yet the question is interesting, and so is the answer.

One of Goethe's earliest publications, written immediately after *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) and *Werther* (1774) was a short essay called "Nach Falkonet und über Falkonet" in which he expressed his great admiration for Rembrandt. And one of the last things he wrote, in November 1831 (he died in March 1832), was a very short essay with the title "*Rembrandt der Denker*." It does not really live up to its title, "Rembrandt the Thinker"; it deals solely with one etching, "The Good Samaritan" (B 90), and offers a very perceptive and appreciative description of it. In the intervening fifty-seven years Goethe said little about Rembrandt; he never saw the great majority of Rembrandt's finest paintings, and he could not survey the whole oeuvre in good reproductions. For a modern reader it may take some mental exertion to realize how limited the impact of even such a great painter was bound to be in Goethe's time. What Goethe saw was clearly not what has been pointed out here, but he sensed a kindred spirit.

Goethe's own influence was of an altogether different order of magnitude. No sooner had his *Goetz* and *Werther* appeared in print than he was internationally famous at twenty-five, and the impact was such that abroad as at home people committed suicide with Goethe's *Werther* in their hands, feeling moved by Goethe's hero to follow his example. Werther's attitudes toward nature, society, and suicide spread like wild fire, and henceforth Goethe's books were eagerly awaited and read as soon as they appeared. Since he disdained copying past successes and kept doing new and different things, growing in the process, a large audience, including the leading novelists, poets, artists, composers, and philosophers all over Europe, followed his development as it occurred; so scholars did not have to reconstruct it long after his death.

It was in large measure Goethe's defiance of convention that won him so many admirers from the start. He continued to be autonomy incarnate, pioneering new forms and styles long before experimentalism itself became a fashion. And while it is a mistake to identify him with the heroes of his books, very much including Faust, he did write again and again about his own deeply experienced problems. This helped to give his works a sense of urgency, and his readers always felt that there was a man behind every word. What they discovered was not mere literature but an extraordinary human being.

Skeptics may wonder whether he really was an extraordinary human being, the more so because he is now often thought of as a rather stiff old *Herr Geheimrat*, a titled gentleman who supposedly received visitors in Weimar with a striking lack of warmth. No doubt, he did not warm up to all who came to call on him in his last years when he was old and still kept writing. But it is revealing to read an account of him that was written by Johann Christian Kestner, who in April 1773 married Charlotte Buff whom Goethe loved, too. Goethe portrayed his own despair at that time, in greatly intensified form, in *Werther*, and it was partly the hero's unhappy love that prompted his suicide. But Kestner's description of the young Goethe is found in a draft for a letter written in May 1772, when Goethe was twenty-one and not yet famous. Kestner cannot be suspected of having projected his admiration for the poet's works into the man who wrote them.

In the spring a certain Goethe came here from Frankfurt, by profession a doctor of laws, aged 23 [a slight error], the only son of a very wealthy father, to look around here for some practice—that was his father's purpose, but his own was rather to study Homer, Pindar, etc., whatever his genius, his way of thinking, and his heart might inspire him to do. . . . I got to know Goethe only late and by chance. . . . You know that I don't form judgments hastily. I did find that he had some genius and a vivid imagination, but I did not consider that enough to esteem him highly.

Before I continue I must attempt some description of him, as I later got to know him very well.

He has a great many talents, is a true genius and a man of character. Possesses an extraordinarily vivid imagination and expresses himself for the most part in images and

metaphors. He also will say himself that he always expresses himself imprecisely and never can express himself precisely, but that he hopes that when he gets older he will think and express thoughts just as they are.

He is violent in all of his emotions but often has a great deal of self-control. His way of thinking is noble; free of prejudices, he acts as he feels without caring whether others like it, whether it is the fashion, whether the way one lives permits it. All compulsion is hateful to him.

He loves children and can occupy himself with them extremely well. . . .

The female sex he holds in very high esteem.

In principles he is not yet firm and is still striving for a system of sorts.

To say something about that, he has a high opinion of Rousseau but is not a blind admirer of him.

He is not what one calls orthodox. But not from pride or caprice or to make an impression. About certain very important issues he speaks to few and does not like to disturb others in their calm ideas.

. . . He does not go to church, not even for the sacraments, and also prays rarely. For he says, for that I am not enough of a liar.*

Goethe's influence was not wholly a function of his writings. Most of the major German writers and philosophers of his time knew him personally. And one of them, F. H. Jacobi, said in a letter written to a friend on August 10, 1774: "This man is autonomous [*selbstständig*] from tip to toe."** This was one of the things about Goethe that made an enormous impression on a whole generation. He embodied a new idea of autonomy that was sharply at odds with the conception of autonomy at the heart of Kant's philosophy. (This contrast will be explored in depth in the first volume of another trilogy, *Discovering the Mind*. That volume will deal with Kant, Goethe, and Hegel, and it will contain a much more thorough discussion of Goethe's contributions to the discovery of the mind.) Above all, however, Goethe did not only develop for all to see, but he placed the development of man at the center of at least four major works.

The first and most important of these was his *Faust*. It is the drama of a man who is deeply dissatisfied with himself and wants to change his life, and as Goethe conceived the tragedy it was the story of a man who *immer strebend sich bemüht*, "who ever exerts himself in ceaseless striving." Although Part One was finished by 1775, Goethe was not satisfied with it, and the earliest version, the *Urfaust*, survived only by chance and was not discovered until 1887. The revision gave Goethe so much trouble that eventually in 1790 he published what he had been able to revise and called that *Faust: A Fragment*. In *Time Is an Artist* it is shown how this precipitated a veritable cult of fragments, which went well with the romantic appreciation of ruins. Eventually, in 1808, Goethe was ready to publish *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy*, while *The Second Part* appeared only after his death in 1832. This drama, then, which was instantly recognized in 1790 as the most ambitious and significant play ever written in German, did not only deal with a man's development but also exemplified the poet's development. One had a sense of its gradual coming into being.

In the seventeen nineties Goethe published *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship*, a four-volume *Bildungsroman*, a novel relating the education of the hero. Again, the theme was how one becomes oneself. A human being is not there all at once in a moment; to be human takes time and involves development.

In 1810 Goethe published his *Doctrine of Colors* and insisted that it was not enough to present one's own doctrine; it was essential to consider the history of the subject and to understand one's own ideas as well as those of others as stages in a development.

Finally, in 1811 he began the publication of a remarkable autobiography with an inspired title: *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*, "From My Life: Poetry and Truth"—or "Fiction and Truth." The subtitle is ambiguous and could mean that not everything that follows is true. But the enduring influence of the work was due to Goethe's attempt to relate his works to his life and to show in effect how an artist's creations must be understood in terms of his development.

In the course of the nineteenth century, generations of German scholars developed this

* Amelung, #24.

** Amelung, #68.

legacy in their writings on the history of art and literature, philosophy, religion, science, and innumerable works that dealt with individuals. Eventually, the twentieth century witnessed some revolts against this tradition: the new criticism in literature, analytical philosophy, and structuralism.

Goethe had never expected to say the last word on any subject. He had the largeness of mind to see himself and his own work in truly developmental terms, and associated becoming with life, and rigidity with death. He hated orthodoxy and would have welcomed new hypotheses while marveling that so many scholars should still think that they had finally found the truth and the one and only right way of doing things.

32

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we are confronted by an abundance of paradigmatic men and women. Extremely few, however, could be said to have a proper place in a chapter that began with Biblical figures like Abraham, Moses, David, and the Suffering Servant, and proceeded to Prometheus, Oedipus, and Socrates. Rembrandt and Goethe may hold their own in such company, for they really changed man's perception of man. But there are not many people in the last two centuries of whom that could be said.

When Napoleon met Goethe face to face he exclaimed, *Voilà un homme!* which means the same as *Ecce homo!* The French emperor himself was also a paradigmatic man who left his mark on man's thought on man, but his impact can be summarized in one short sentence. He showed how a human being can raise himself up by his own efforts and the force of his personality to become the most powerful man on earth. One could say that the world has not been the same since.

Abraham Lincoln was an infinitely more lovable man, but much of his impact is due to his variation of the Napoleon theme. He was born in a log cabin but became President of the United States. His sense of humor, his compassion, and his unsurpassed eloquence round out the picture.

The entrepreneurs who made it from rags to riches do not add much to the lessons taught by Napoleon and Lincoln. What Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, and scores of others proved was only how many can play this game, and that one need not be a great general or politician to acquire enormous power.

The two recent men who, more than any others, changed our image of man, mostly through their writings but also through their lives, are Nietzsche and Freud. But their impact cannot be summed up in a paragraph and will be explored in depth in another trilogy: *Discovering the Mind*. The second part of that sequel will deal at length with Nietzsche and Heidegger; the third, with Freud and Jung; and there will be no pictures. In the present volume it makes more sense to deal in some depth with a man who also adds something to the understanding of the pictures: Vincent van Gogh.

The following pages are based entirely on *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, published in three volumes with reproductions of all the drawings in the correspondence. All of the letters from which excerpts are cited here were written to his brother Theo, except those identified with a B, which were addressed to Emile Bernard, a younger painter. Since most of the letters are not dated but all are numbered in chronological order, the numbers are given in parentheses to make it easy for the reader to check the context and read more. These letters constitute a great treasure and, together with van Gogh's paintings and drawings, they amply justify his inclusion here. They present an embarrassment of riches, and it is difficult to resist the temptation to quote too much.

33

I intend to try to form a collection of such things, which wouldn't be quite unworthy of the title "Heads of the People." (257)

I should reproach myself if I did not try to make pictures which will rouse serious thoughts in those who think seriously about art and about life. (404)

Though I see . . . so many pictures which, if you like, are faultlessly drawn and painted as to technique, yet many of them bore me terribly because they give me neither food for the heart nor for the mind, because they have obviously been made without a certain passion. (406)

I prefer painting people's eyes to cathedrals, for there is something in the eyes that is not in the cathedral, however solemn and imposing the latter may be—a human soul, be it that of a poor beggar or of a streetwalker, is most interesting to me. (441)

I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life—the power to create. . . . And in a picture I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring. . . . Ah! portraiture, portraiture with the thoughts, the soul of the model in it, that is what I think must come. (531)

Though here there are some patients very seriously ill, the fear and horror of madness that I used to have has already lessened a great deal. And though here you continually hear terrible cries and howls like beasts in a menagerie, in spite of that people get to know each other very well and help each other when their attacks come on. When I am working in the garden, they all come to look, and I assure you they have the discretion and manners to leave me alone—more than the good people of the town of Arles, for instance. (591)

It's almost a whole month since I came here; not once have I had the slightest desire to be elsewhere, only the wish to work is getting a tiny bit stronger. I have not noticed any very definite desire to be anywhere else in the others either, and this may well come from the feeling that we are too thoroughly shattered to live outside. What I cannot quite understand is their absolute idleness. But that is the great fault of the South, and its ruin. But what a lovely country, and what a lovely blue and what a sun. (593)

What Rembrandt has alone or almost alone among painters, that tenderness of gaze which we see, whether it's in the "Men of Emmaus" or in the "Jewish Bride" . . . that heartbroken tenderness, that glimpse of a superhuman infinitude that seems so natural there—in many places you come upon it in Shakespeare, too. And then above all he is full of portraits, grave and gay. (597)

There is much more about Rembrandt in the letters to Bernard. Van Gogh speaks of "Rembrandt, whom I used to study so much" (B 8), "Rembrandt . . . the head of our northern school" (B 11), and emphasizes repeatedly that he sees himself as a Dutch painter and a foreigner in France. "With all due admiration for Baudelaire," he feels sufficiently annoyed by some lines the poet had written about Rembrandt to spell out his admiration for Rembrandt in two long letters (B 12 and 13), and he sees Rembrandt above all as a painter of portraits: "I am just trying to make you see the great simple thing: the painting of humanity, or rather of a whole republic, by the simple means of portraiture. This first and foremost."

34

Actually, Rembrandt had also revolutionized landscape painting. He was the first great artist in the Western world to do large landscapes in oil without any people in them. And van Gogh himself is probably better known for his landscapes than for his portraits. That makes it doubly interesting to note how he felt that his main concern was with humanity.

Of course, what makes his landscapes different from those of his predecessors and above all from the often insipid and anemic academic landscapes of the nineteenth century is that his express human emotions. The emphasis on "expression" recurs frequently in his letters, but we need not base ourselves on his testimony or on the fact that painters greatly influenced by him later called themselves "expressionists." His landscapes speak for themselves. Rather they speak for the artist and convey his anguish, his emotions, his humanity.

Van Gogh also saw his landscapes in another perspective.

I must insist on devoting at least a year in Paris to drawing from the nude and from plaster casts. . . . Neither must you suppose that those years of drawing out-of-doors have been wasted. For that is just the thing that those who have worked only at academies and studios lack—the power to see the reality in which they live . . . (449)

The academic or scholastic as a type could almost be defined in this way as one who does not see and has no vital contact with the reality in which he lives. For van Gogh, nature, which he painted like nobody before him, was part of the human reality, part, one might say, of man's lot.

I see the lark soaring in the spring air as well as the greatest optimist; but I also see the young girl of about twenty, who might have been in good health, a victim of consumption, and who will perhaps drown herself before she dies of any illness.

If one is always in respectable company among rather well-to-do bourgeois, one does not notice this so much perhaps . . .

Corot, who after all had more serenity than anybody else, who felt the spring so deeply, was he not as simple as a workingman all his life, and so sensitive to all the miseries of others? And what struck me in his biography was that when he was already very old in 1870 and 1871, he certainly looked at the bright sky, but at the same time he visited the ambulances where the wounded lay dying.

Illusions may fade, but the sublime *remains*. . . . And I think that in moments when one does not care for nature any more, one still cares for humanity. (453)

35

It remains to be shown that van Gogh was really a paradigmatic human being. That he was extraordinarily sensitive and humane and an admirable person as well as a great artist should be plain, but was his life really exemplary in any way?

We only need to recall the Prologue to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, cited in the last section (20) of the previous chapter, the fascinating passage that begins:

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*.

I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under . . .

In 1905, the year that there was an exhibition of thirty-five van Goghs, some German expressionist painters joined together in "The Artists' Association Bridge" (*Die Künstlervereinigung Brücke*). Frank Whitford, among others, has noted in his *Expressionism* that: "Nietzsche, the Group's favourite philosopher, certainly used the bridge as an important symbol in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and this may well have been the source for the Group's name."^{*}

That the same artists who were profoundly influenced by van Gogh were also enthusiastic admirers of Nietzsche is a fact recognized by most historians of German expressionism. But the astonishing similarities between these two pastors' sons from the north who created some of their finest works within a few miles of each other in the late eighteen-eighties have not been widely noted at all. In the present context it will be sufficient to note how strikingly van Gogh embodied the kind of humanity that Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* celebrated in his Prologue, and how many passages in his letters bring to mind section 283 of Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, which contains these words: "The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to *live dangerously!*" (See also *Life at the Limits*, section 18.) With such themes in mind, let us look at some other passages from van Gogh's letters.

Like one of the old lepers, one would like to call from afar to the people: Don't come too near me, for intercourse with me brings you sorrow and loss. . . . That there is a great chance of going under in the struggle, that a painter is something like a sentinelle perdue . . . (248)

I wouldn't spare myself. (249)

Without any definite motive, I can't help adding a thought which often occurs to me. Not only did I begin drawing relatively late in life, but it may also be that I shall not live for so very many years. . . . I do *not* intend to spare myself, nor to avoid emotions or difficulties—I don't care much if I live a longer or shorter time . . . So I go on like an ignoramus who knows only this one thing: "In a few years I must finish a certain work." . . . The world concerns me only in so far as I feel a certain indebtedness and duty toward it because I have walked this earth for thirty years, and, out of gratitude, want to leave some souvenir in the shape of drawings or pictures—not made to please a certain taste in art, but to express a sincere human feeling. . . . This is the way I regard myself—as having to accomplish something with heart and love in it within a few years, doing this with energy. If I live longer, "tant mieux," but I don't count on it. . . . I don't consider my studies things made for their own sake, but am always thinking of my work as a whole. (309)

^{*} *Expressionism*, p. 38.

There are circumstances when one has to choose between one's work and having nothing to eat, or between eating and dropping one's work (namely, when the work brings expenses and for the moment brings no profit). . . . Our work remains, but we do not, and the main thing is to create; I would rather have a few years of that than years of brooding over it and putting it off. (310)

Life is not long for anybody, and the problem is only to make something of it (397).

Mother is unable to grasp the idea that painting is a *faith*, and that it imposes the *duty* to disregard public opinion—and that in painting one conquers by *perseverance* and not by making *concessions* . . . (398)

I always think of what Millet said, "*I would never do away with suffering*, for it often is what makes artists express themselves most energetically." (400)

. . . wanting to be something, wanting to be active—so that when one dies one can think, I go where all those who have dared something go . . . (448)

Carlyle says: "You know the glowworms in Brazil that shine so that in the evening ladies stick them into their hair with pins; well, fame is a fine thing, but look you, to the artist it is what the hairpin is to the insects . . ." I have a horror of success . . . (524)

I am struggling with a canvas begun some days before my indisposition, a "Reaper"; the study is all yellow, terribly thickly painted, but the subject was fine and simple. For I see in this reaper . . . the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping. So it is—if you like—the opposite of that sower I tried to do before. But there's nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold. (604)

Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason has half foundered because of it—that's all right—but you . . . can still choose your side, I think, acting with humanity, but *que veux-tu?* (652)

That is the end of Vincent van Gogh's last letter, which his brother Theo found on him when he was called to Auvers-sur-Oise where Vincent had shot himself and died July 29, 1890.

36

It would be easy to add parallels between van Gogh and Nietzsche, but one crucial difference should be stressed. During the last months of his life Nietzsche wrote his *Ecce Homo* and gave the four chapters that comprise the book rather startling titles: "Why I Am So Wise"; "Why I Am So Clever"; "Why I Write Such Good Books"; and "Why I Am a Destiny." Unlike most of his interpreters, he had a sense of humor and a savage wit. He vastly admired Socrates' sarcasm; and his book must be understood against the background of the *Apology*, in which Socrates explained how he discovered that he was indeed the wisest of men—not because he was so wise, but rather because his contemporaries were so stupid. Nevertheless, Nietzsche wrote *Ecce Homo* feeling that, although his contemporaries had so far failed to recognize this, his books *were* good and he was an outstanding philosopher. And he was right. No other philosopher of his generation compares with him. Although his books scarcely found readers at all before he collapsed in January 1889, he is now widely considered one of the greatest philosophers of all time.

Van Gogh was one of the greatest painters of all time, but his contemporaries failed to realize this before he shot himself. So did he. Like Franz Kafka, he consistently underestimated himself. Psychologically, the reasons may have been similar in both cases. Van Gogh and Kafka had fathers who considered them failures and disapproved of their decisions to paint or write. Nietzsche had the good fortune that his father died when he was a small child, and his family vastly admired his intelligence and his successes in school during the crucial early years of his life, and even for some time beyond that when he became a professor—actually, until he really found himself. Van Gogh and Nietzsche shared the courage of going their own way, refusing to make the concessions that might have led to quick success. They earned immortality by never compromising to win acclaim. But Nietzsche felt sure most of the time that he would be "born posthumously." One of the most poignant themes in van Gogh's letters is his failure to recognize the worth of his works and his refusal to believe those who in his final months praised them in print.

He felt guilty because Theo supported him and his canvases did not sell. He kept trying to convince Theo and himself that if he worked terribly hard all day long he really was entitled, no less than any other workingman, to having a roof over his head and enough food to keep alive, and that eventually his paintings would be worth as much as the canvases and the paints had

cost, and might even bring in enough money to cover his living expenses. In a relatively bold moment in October 1888, he said in a letter, written while Nietzsche was at work on *Ecce Homo*:

I myself realize the necessity of producing even to the extent of being mentally crushed and physically drained by it, just because after all I have no other means of ever getting back what we have spent.

I cannot help it that my pictures do not sell. Nevertheless the time will come when people will see that they are worth more [!] than the price of the paint and my own living, very meager after all, that is put into them.

I have no other desire nor any other interest as to money or finance, than primarily to have no debts.

But my dear boy, my debt is so great that when I have paid it, which all the same I hope to succeed in doing, the pains of producing pictures will have taken my whole life from me, and it will seem to me then that I have not lived. (557)

Gauguin was telling me the other day that he had seen a picture by Claude Monet of sunflowers in a large Japanese vase, very fine, but—he likes mine better. I don't agree . . . If by the time I am forty I have done a picture of figures like the flowers Gauguin was speaking of, I shall have a position in art equal to that of anyone, no matter who. So, perseverance. (563)

That was written in December 1888. When he committed suicide a year and a half later, he was only thirty-seven.

Before the end of that same December he suffered his first attack and cut off part of one of his ears. After that he was considered mad and had less confidence than before. But being as lonely as ever, he kept writing to Theo, and his reflections on his own condition are as sane and lucid as they are moving. One is inclined to say that no man could ever have seen himself in a more detached and sober light. If there is any count on which these letters can be faulted, it is only his excessive modesty.

After all we must take our share, my boy, of the diseases of our time—in a way it is only fair after all that, having lived some years in comparatively good health, we should have our share sooner or later. As for me, you know well enough that I should not exactly have chosen madness if I had had a choice . . . And there'll perhaps be the consolation of being able to go on working a bit at painting. (585)

I was extremely surprised at the article on my pictures which you sent me. I needn't tell you that I hope to go on thinking that I do not paint like that, but I do see in it how I ought to paint. . . .

Why not say what he said of my sunflowers, *with far more grounds*, of those magnificent and perfect hollyhocks of Quost's, and his yellow irises, and those splendid peonies of Jeannin's?

When I had done those sunflowers, I looked for the contrast and yet the equivalent, and I said—It is the cypress. (625)

It no more occurred to van Gogh that these painters were not in his class and would be forgotten, while two large museums in his native Holland would be devoted to his own work, than it entered his mind to cite Isaiah 53 in letter 585 (see section 26 above).

37

Like no other painter except only Rembrandt, van Gogh created a stunning series of self-portraits that challenge us as we look at them. Yet this searing autobiography in paint does not tell us what we find in his letters, unless we have read the letters, too. "Portraiture with the thoughts, the soul of the model in it" is possible, but even when the artist knows these thoughts and this soul inside out, the example of van Gogh's self-portraits and letters shows how much words can add to images. At no point do the portraits become mere illustrations. If anything, the words help us to see more in the pictures. But the relationship is clearly not one of means and ends but more nearly like that of a piano and a cello playing a Beethoven sonata.

The portraits in this volume speak for themselves and address the question, What is man? So do the texts, which up to this point have actually provided another series of images: first, variations on three themes; then quotations from Shakespeare, Pascal, and Nietzsche; and finally verbal portraits of exemplary human beings.

VI

VIEWS AND IMAGES

38

Much of humanity lives at the limits, as millions do in Benares and in Calcutta. Through most of history it may have seemed reasonable to assume that misery was man's lot. The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789 represent a profound break with the past. Men refused to accept their lot and decided to take their fate into their own hands. Initially, the slaves in North and South America, the serfs in Russia, much of the population of Europe, and the vast majority of the people living in Asia, in Africa, and in Australia were not affected greatly by these events, and women almost everywhere continued to accept as their lot the conditions in which they found themselves. But the fires lit in the late eighteenth century spread, and within two centuries men and women almost everywhere began to question their lot and wondered in effect if there was any limit to our ability to alter our condition.

Destitution seems remediable. Scientific and technological advances hold out hope that extreme hunger and thirst need not afflict much of mankind forever. But what of the other conditions listed at the beginning of *Life at the Limits*: delivery (giving birth), deformity, disaster, defeat, disgrace, distress, desolation and darkness (meaning deafness and blindness), dehumanization, danger, decay, and death? Some kinds of deformity might conceivably become less frequent, some forms of distress might be lessened if not abolished, and some types of dehumanization could be avoided. Yet there is a sense in which all of us live at the limits, even if most of us most of the time are not aware of it. And this lack of awareness means being but half alive. Extreme situations can open our eyes and make life more meaningful.

Not only disasters, defeats, or dangers that come to us can rouse us from the lethargy in which most of us live, but the conditions of other human beings can serve the same function. Often the death of a person close to us has this effect. Tolstoy's life was changed by his brother's death, and in *Anna Karenina* he immortalized this event by describing the death of Levin's brother. Since the Book of Genesis and the *Iliad* great literature has served this function again and again, and so has great music and art.

Van Gogh and Jean François Millet were far from alone in feeling, "I would never do away with suffering, for it often is what makes artists express themselves most energetically" (section 35 above). Nor do only artists grow through suffering. But as long as we close our eyes to the suffering of our fellowmen, we cannot hope to understand or be able to cope with our own suffering. Much less can we help others.

Of course, human suffering is so vast that none of us can face up to the whole of it. Much less can we be mindful of all of it all the time. To live and do something with our lives we simply have to shut our eyes to most of it most of the time. If we tried to attend to the voices of all our brothers and sisters, we could never get anything done. But to understand my lot I must gain some conception of man's lot, and to do that I must face the human condition without blinking.

It may be helpful to distinguish three dimensions of life at the limits. First, there is the sense in which these words fit the color photographs in *Life at the Limits*. Then, there is the sense in which all of us live at the limits. Finally, there is the sense in which some people have chosen to forsake a sheltered existence. Abraham left his country and kindred and his father's house and was rewarded, but he was a mythical character and we know him only through litera-

ture. Some others who, like van Gogh, struck out on their own have also reaped a great name and become a blessing for others, but at immense cost to themselves.

Still, it is worth asking whether living dangerously is not the price for becoming a blessing. Some pay the price in vain, but that is part of the danger. Those who shun the risk of discovering the limits die without knowledge of humanity. They remain blind to their brothers' and sisters' lot and also to the full measure of their own humanity.

39

Time Is an Artist explores the temporality of man's lot. It surveys different attitudes, as does *Life at the Limits*. The aim of this trilogy is to show various aspects of man's lot in different perspectives to get the reader to see things differently. In this respect the text and the pictures have the same purpose.

Most people in Asia and Africa have very little sense of time, do not know when they were born, and do not appreciate the difference between one hundred and one thousand years. Few peoples have ever had any clear notion of their own past. The common human tendency is to assume that things have always been more or less as they are at present. Stories about times when things were different are usually myths that have no place in time.

Man's refusal to face up to the prospect of his own death has been noted widely and exaggerated greatly. It has become fashionable to claim that until very recently death was a subject that was taboo, that all men are afraid of death, and that "in our unconscious, death is never possible in regard to ourselves." The last claim is presented as a bit of "basic knowledge" in Kübler-Ross's influential book *On Death and Dying* (p. 2) along with the other two, although the evidence collected in the book shows vividly how wrong the last two claims are. The first, that death was unmentionable until very recently, is really grotesque, and one may well wonder where the people who keep saying this were during the second World War, if not during the first, and during the twenties, or fifties. Moreover, death has been one of the favorite themes of epic, lyric, and dramatic poets, of novelists, painters, and sculptors, and has also been presented again and again in grand opera.

In spite of all this, most people do not live on intimate terms with their own death. Those who do, like Käthe Kollwitz, for example, are exceptions. Born in 1867, she etched her first "Death" when still in her twenties, and she included another "Death" in a cycle of etchings that was also published before the turn of the century. Before the first World War she did drawings and etchings showing a mother with a dead child, a woman going into the water to drown herself, "Run Over," and Death taking a mother from her child. After 1914 death became even more central in her work, and this never impeded her steadily growing popularity. In 1924 she did a self-portrait that she called "Seated Woman with the Hand of Death"; it shows that death held no terror for her. Ten years later she did another charcoal drawing called "Woman Welcomes Death." And the title of her last cycle was once again "Death." These eight lithographs include "Death Recognized as a Friend" as well as another beautiful self-portrait with the hand of death. Like her final self-portrait, which shows her in profile, stooped and old, it expresses a great readiness to die.

Kollwitz was widely recognized in Germany as probably the greatest woman artist of all time, and her attitudes were thus not merely private but appreciated by many. Nevertheless . . .

On a very different level, the 1948 edition of John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, published when death was allegedly taboo, has well over four hundred entries in the index for "death," and at least another two hundred for "dead." But these include such listings as "Death, there is no" and "there is no such thing as."

Attitudes toward death ought to be seen as part of a larger syndrome that also includes attitudes toward age and change and, as is shown in *Time Is an Artist*, toward history and restorations. Man's lot is temporal, but most people find it hard to face up to their temporality.

Nobody is totally unaware of it. Change cannot be ignored altogether, and such cyclical changes as that of night and day or the repetition of the seasons must be taken into account for the sake of survival. But recognition of the cycle robs change of its sting; what passes away returns; and we do not come face to face with the irrevocable.

It is irrevocable change that poses the greatest problem for man. Hence the whole second part of this trilogy has been concerned with this problem and its ramifications.

40

Our first theme in *What Is Man?* was, condensed into four words: Man is ephemeral, but . . . The variations on this theme include some of the world's finest poetry and most profound wisdom. Recognition of man's temporality is the beginning of wisdom but not its end. In one way or another it has been met again and again with a bold "nevertheless."

Not only must each of us die, but the earth has no future. Eventually all our efforts must come to naught. Our lot is hopeless. Van Gogh put the matter well when he wrote to his brother: "Life is not long for anybody, and the problem is only to make something of it."

We are bound to go under but can choose to die now or to hold out a while yet. Fools hold out for no purpose, assuming that suffering will spare them or will go away while pleasure will not; and the sufferings of others they largely ignore. Suicides they despise or pity, drifting along in life as if inertia were our lot. It makes far more sense to consider suicide seriously and to ask oneself why one should choose life. Thousands have echoed Socrates' challenge: The unexamined life is not worth living. If so—and for that matter also if this is an overstatement—we should have a reason for living.

Some people suppose that, lacking a purpose or aim in life, they nevertheless are here for a purpose. Mostly, they do not think much about what that might be but cling to the notion that there must be a purpose. If there were none, they feel, life would be meaningless. This is what God means to many—too many. God is for them an excuse for their own lack of purpose, which is not what he was for Abraham, Moses, or David.

There is no better way to rouse us from aimless drifting than facing up to life at the limits and irrevocable time. Then we realize that we had lived with our eyes closed to our own condition. Made aware of man's lot, we can change our lives. It is not so much that the life we had been living "is not worth living" as it is the sudden sense that we had not really been living, that we had been half dead. But however much time has run out on us, it is not too late to live and perhaps also to die with a will.

Van Gogh did not drift. Perhaps no other artist achieved so much in such a short time. But his artistic career began with his discovery of life at the limits and his passion to paint the poor. He lived at the edge and felt that he had not much time.

Nietzsche discovered the limits not through the sufferings of others but through his own. His discovery was helped by Greek tragedy.

Goya's eyes were opened to the sufferings of others by his own illness. There are many ways, but in one way or another it is life at the limits or irrevocable time that awakens us. A book can do worse than try to confront us with both.

41

The insistence that men are unequal was our second theme, and we found that the most influential variations on this theme were associated with the degradation of large groups of people. Still, we noted, it does not follow that all men are equal. Are they? What is the truth of the matter, regardless of consequences? And if it should be that men are not equal, need the open admission of that have dire consequences?

It is not at all clear what might be meant by saying that all men are equal. The claim has become so familiar that it may not appear to be puzzling. But what would it mean to say that all dogs are equal or—still more perplexing—that all animals are equal? The question here is not whether these claims are true but what they might mean.

Dogs are different. There are poodles, pointers, and Pekingese; bloodhounds, bulldogs, and affenpinscher; German shepherds, Great Danes, and Saint Bernards, as well as ever so many other kinds; and many dogs are, of course, mongrels. Nor would it seem that all mongrels are equal, or all poodles, or all German shepherds. Are a miniature pinscher and a seeing-eye dog equal? If anyone said that all dogs are equal, we would half expect him to mean that he hates them all. But the assertion could hardly mean much except that all dogs are dogs.

Physically, the differences between human beings are not as tremendous as those between dogs. The variations in size, shape, and color are not nearly so great. Still, the differences in physical and mental capacities are considerable, and that is not all. Before one makes any effort to understand what the claim that all men are equal could possibly mean, one ought to be clear about its *prima facie* absurdity. This may call for a change of tone.

42

What is man?

The cruelest and tenderest animal
most malleable and most creative.

Water that can be oceans and glaciers

lakes
waterfalls
rivers
snow
icebergs
steam
fog
and crystals

does not approach man's variety.

Who would say

all water is equal
drink this
it is contaminated
but all water is equal?

Or

this is a swamp
and there waves
roar against rocks
breaking
yet all water is equal?

Nor do all break the same way.

Learn to love the difference:

Van Gogh
Nietzsche
Mozart
Byron
Keats
Shelley
Rimbaud
Franz Marc
Toulouse-Lautrec

so many ways of breaking soon after dawn.

See the snowy peaks
that are still in the sun
when the night has swallowed the hills
how unlike they are

Titian painting himself
Tolstoy condemning art
Goethe finishing Faust
Goya

lonely and deaf
gazing on Saturn devouring his children

Michelangelo back in the Sistine Chapel
for the Last Judgment
Verdi writing his *Falstaff*
Sophocles
Oedipus at Colonus
and Picasso still fooling around at ninety.

Are all artists equal?

Even the greatest?

Or are all men artists?

Look at floods and tidal waves

Attila

Jenghiz Khan

Tamerlane

Stalin and Hitler

conquerors from Egypt and Assur
waves upon waves from Rome
spreading slavery
launching crusades
and modern death rained on Ethiopia.

Millions were soldiers

not faceless

though we do not see their eyes

mouths

features

no two men alike

yet all these are men

and so are craftsmen and traders

butchers and hangmen

farmers and prophets

men all of them

and one could start all over again

speaking not only of women

and children

but also of slaves and victims.

I shall not speak of the nameless

but show them to you

how different they are

and how beautiful.

43

The claim that all men are equal is revolutionary rhetoric designed to gain as much support as possible for protests against specific inequalities. The opening fanfare of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, published in 1762, is magnificent: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Clearly, the first half of that flourish is as metaphorical as the second. Rousseau's meaning is spelled out soon enough: "The first slaves were made so by force; their state was perpetuated by cowardice."

Soon the Constitution of Massachusetts varied the rhetoric: "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential and unalienable rights." The Declaration of Independence in 1776 went further: "We hold these truths to be self-evident,—that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

This rhetoric, ostensibly inspired by "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," was

obviously meant to gain as much support as possible for the good cause of the American rebellion against imperialism. Philosophers and even theologians have agreed for the most part that it is not self-evident that man was created or that there is a Creator. Even St. Thomas Aquinas thought that he could prove only the existence of a First Cause, a First Mover, but not that the world was created; and he assuredly did not consider it self-evident, anymore than Luther did three hundred years later, that men were created equal. Thomas Jefferson himself, though he took pride in having written the Declaration of Independence, did not really consider the rights to either life or liberty unalienable; he was a slaveholder and believed in capital punishment.

Physically and mentally, in their talents and sensibilities, human beings are clearly not equal. To give meaning to egalitarianism, philosophers have distinguished political and economic equality. Again it meets the eye that in both respects there are great inequalities, but the egalitarian point is not really that men *are* equal but that they *ought* to be.

In a way, then, radical inequality is man's lot, but some people feel that men's destiny is to achieve equality. The claim of equality sounds descriptive and is presented in that form to deceive men for their own good, but its intent is prescriptive; it is an appeal to work for a goal that is felt to be noble. Is it?

We should at least be clear about what this prescription involves. First of all, political equality is part of the ideology of democracy but not one of the principles on which all societies are based. The claim that man as such is destined for political equality involves the claim that all existing social structures should be changed to become democratic, although this would involve the destruction of ever so many traditional cultures. The question has to be asked whether this is not a new form of imperialism that insists on the superiority of one culture—ours—over all others and does not shrink from destroying the others to spread our own.

The problem is complicated further by another question. Although political equality is part of the ideology of democracy, it is doubtful whether it is also part of the reality of life in a democracy. For a long time so-called democracies refused the vote to women, and blacks could not vote in large parts of the U.S.A. What political equality meant to the disenfranchised was the right to vote. But it is surely absurd to claim that all who have the right to vote are politically equal. The differences in political power are immense even in democracies, and if ideologists have succeeded in papering over such inequalities with more or less eloquent words, they have not shown how this problem could ever be solved.

It may be humane to abolish some ancient political inequalities at a great cost to tradition. But to decide about this in particular cases one must weigh all kinds of pros and cons that the rhetoric of men's equality is designed to obscure.

44

Men's economic inequality is, if possible, still more obvious than their political inequality. It is appalling that so many people are starving while others have more to eat than is good for them and more money than they know how to spend; but it is a far cry from this feeling to the demand that all men ought to be made economically equal.

People differ enormously in their interests, habits, and needs. Van Gogh needed canvases, brushes, and paints, as well as freedom from obligations, distractions, and duties. Nietzsche required the same sort of freedom and otherwise little but pens or pencils and paper; Mozart, also a violin, a piano, and access to other instruments; Goya, a house of his own with large bare walls to paint on; Sophocles needed three actors—four in his last play—a chorus, a stage, and—or so he thought—a designer. Michelangelo needed big pieces of marble and a large studio. Rembrandt liked to collect all sorts of paintings and etchings, costumes and objets d'art.

To become a scholar or a physician requires more years of study than most other jobs, and it is far from self-evident why all scholars, physicians, artists, composers, and writers, storekeepers, actors, plumbers, and typists, lawyers, senators, farmers, and teachers should be economically equal. To say that each ought to have what he *needs* opens another hornets' nest because "need" is another word that is often used to cover up countless problems; but in any case this claim is clearly incompatible with the claim that men are called to be equal.

Reversing the misleading rhetoric of two centuries, we really ought to begin by saying: Human beings are born unequal. And then we should ask to what extent this original inequality

should be remedied. Does fairness require us to make every effort to compensate those who are disadvantaged while holding back the stronger, healthier, and all who have special talents or who work harder?

Holding back such children is surely criminal. Realizing this, even some egalitarians argue that we must provide incentives for children like this because in the long run that is in the interest of all. For the less gifted need good doctors and can be taught to enjoy the works of the artists and poets. But once we admit that, we have left the claims of equality far behind.

45

"Equality of Opportunity" is a slogan that at least has the virtue of not parading as a truth, a description, a fact. It looks like a plea or a program for action, but in fact it is once again a rhetorical flourish that is not really taken seriously by those who proclaim it.*

People are born with radically different opportunities. One way of approaching equality of opportunity would be to prevent random breeding. In this way one could decrease the vast inequalities of opportunity that are due to our genes. To insure compliance, of course, most people would have to be sterilized, while a very few men and more women would be given the opportunity or the duty of having children. If one had recourse to artificial insemination, millions could have the same father, and genetic diversity could be diminished drastically. While a vast fund of potential talents would thus be lost forever, people still would not be born with the same opportunities, for brothers and sisters can differ enormously, and half-brothers and half-sisters cannot be assumed to have the same gifts and capacities. Only cloning could produce equality of opportunity at birth.

The objections to such extreme proposals are the very same that we shall encounter as we consider less drastic measures that would bring us a little closer to equality of opportunity. Most of those who profess to desire equality of opportunity are fortunately unwilling to pay the price, which is twofold: the loss of diversity and the loss of freedom.

The schemes considered so far would come nowhere near their goals if we did not also abolish family life. And even those who consider these schemes unacceptable ought to consider the abolition of the family if they are at all serious about equality of opportunity. For our environment during infancy is decisive for the formation of character and intelligence and our entire future development. Freud stressed this point more than any previous psychologist, and since his death many non-Freudians have confirmed it. Intelligence, for example, depends very heavily on the mother's encouragement or detachment, and children from utterly different homes do not have the same opportunities. By the time children enter school their opportunities differ, and during the school years differences in the home continue to affect their opportunities—even more so when the teachers do not teach much and rely a great deal on homework.

The abolition of the family is certainly feasible. In Israel some of the early kibbutzim minimized the role of the family while maintaining an atmosphere of great warmth and love. The children were brought up in children's houses, which is still the case in most kibbutzim, and all children were supposed to be loved as if they were everybody's children. But gradually the role of the family reasserted itself, and it would have required a drastic infringement of personal freedom to keep parents from showing a special interest in their own children. Moreover, ninety-six percent of Israelis have always preferred not to live in kibbutzim, and the government, of course, has never compelled them to do so. Plainly, few people really place a high value on equality of opportunity.

It is not enough to say that people merely pay lip service to this slogan. Equality of opportunity is either a hollow cliché or a pernicious goal. It is fortunate that hardly anyone is really serious about it.

If every opportunity that cannot be offered to all were refused and wasted, few opportunities could be accepted. It may be objected: Opportunities that cannot be offered to all could be made competitive; equality of opportunity is compatible with competition. That sounds plausible until one asks at what stage in their lives people are supposed to have equal opportunities. If always, we should have to prevent competition and rigidly limit freedom lest people make choices that will deprive them of opportunities open to others. When they are free to do so, men, women,

* Cf. Kaufmann, *Without Guilt and Justice*, section 27, for a more detailed analysis of equality.

and children make different choices, learn different things, acquire different habits and skills, run different risks and sometimes must pay the price, tie themselves down in various ways, and soon have widely different opportunities. There is thus a conflict between freedom and diversity on the one hand, and equality of opportunity on the other; and to maximize the latter at all costs would be pernicious.

Those who claim to be for equality of opportunity rarely advocate measures that would promote less inequality of opportunity at birth than we have now. They are not concerned very much about the time of birth. If such equality is really wanted nevertheless, but neither at birth nor during the whole of men's lives, when are people supposed to have equal opportunities? At five or six perhaps, when the children first enter school? If so, we should have to provide the same controlled environment for all small children, giving a central authority power to bring up all small children in the same way. If the point were to bring at least equality of opportunity to all children everywhere all over the world, we should need a central authority that would provide the same environment everywhere; and radical egalitarians might even wish to stifle all originality and individuality before the age of five or six.

Even this staggering sacrifice of diversity and of freedom would fall far short of the desired goal. Given the green light at last at the age of five, the children, unless they were completely squelched by that time, would still become quite unequal within a few years. Hence no good reasons remain for making so vast a sacrifice in the first place.

Nothing said here conflicts with what the French call *la carrière ouverte aux talents*, careers being open to all on the basis of talent, regardless of race, sex, religion, and social station. But that ideal certainly does not involve any claim that all men are equal, or that they ought to be made as equal as possible, or that we should strive for equality of opportunity at the cost of freedom and diversity.

The claim that equality is a myth does not entail bigotry, prejudice, or inhumanity. Bigots assume that all Jews or all blacks or all women are alike. In fact, no two men or women are equal. The pictures in this book celebrate the exhilarating diversity of human beings. The implication of the Book of Genesis that all men and women are brothers and sisters is truly profound and a beautiful metaphor. Moses and the prophets did not claim that all were created equal.

Some statistical generalizations about various groups may be well founded, but they do not prove that all members of such groups are alike, much less that they ought to be treated the same way simply because all of them are Jews or blacks or women. Every human being should be seen and treated as an individual.

46

The images in this volume were not created to prove a point, but are presented in an arrangement that may help to support these views. One approach would have been to group together pictures of women nursing children in different parts of the world, and then perhaps children at play, people at work, people doing the same things here and there, and in the end old people of different races, always in a manner suggesting that essentially all people everywhere are the same.

Perhaps there was a time when the similarities came as a great surprise to many people. To me they seem obvious, and what enchants me are the differences. When I go to a distant country I would be disappointed if what I saw were not greatly different from what I had seen before, and that goes for the people, too. But the point does not depend on travel. I feel the same way about books. If a novel is very much like other novels, why should I take time to read it? I seek a distinctive voice, also in philosophy and in art.

Would it not be folly to say that all portraits are equal? and outright idiocy to declare that all paintings are equal? Not even all of Rembrandt's paintings are equal, and my favorites are very different from the works of other painters. If I were to present them alongside paintings by other masters who dealt with similar subjects, the point would certainly be to mark the contrasts and to discover more clearly what in his art is distinctive.

It would be silly to juxtapose two of Rembrandt's self-portraits to show how they resemble

each other: the same nose, mouth, cheeks, chin, and eyes! What did you expect? It is surely the differences that are worth noting. I feel the same way about people in different lands, and about men, women, and children in the same country.

Instead of ignoring the context in which they live and showing details from here and there that do not seem very different at a sufficiently abstract level—an approach that brings to mind the so-called structuralists in our academies—the images offered here are shown in their concrete context. In *Life at the Limits* this way of seeing people is followed all the way to the end; almost a hundred color photographs show nothing but people in Khajuraho, Benares, and Calcutta. Even here, the differences between life in a village, life in the holy city on the banks of the Ganges, and life in Calcutta, which is widely considered the worst slum in all the world, should be sensed if not smelled. Although every image can stand by itself, the pictures are presented as a series and are cumulative in their effect. The milieu in which these people live should be experienced, yet not a single picture was either taken or printed here in order to make some point. These people spoke to me, each in his or her way; every scene shown addressed me in its own way; and here they are, ready to speak to others.

Here are men, women, and children in the same part of the world, living under similar, though not the same, conditions, all of them with some experience of life at the limits, all of them with some knowledge of destitution, and yet their reactions and moods, their characters and their looks seem widely different. They are not creatures of their environment, neither do they manage to dominate and remake it. But it would be idle to try to translate all these images into prose. For good reasons they have no captions.

In *Time Is an Artist* the focus is not on faces. But the final color plate shows the head of an ancient Egyptian mummy that looks as if time had turned it to bronze.

In *What Is Man?* the color plates are presented in three groups of thirty-two plates with about a hundred and seventy images. The first two groups are arranged geographically in an attempt to place the people in their milieu. That a woman in New Guinea nurses her baby or that an Australian aborigine can look sad, or that some women in Bali are very beautiful, is hardly news; and to stage comparisons to underline the fact that human beings everywhere really are human beings calls for the response: What did you expect?

It would be more to the point to say that the reason for printing these pictures here was that I love them, and it is hardly decent to ask a man why he loves what he loves. But the arrangement should help to convey my own experience by transposing you into different environments: New Guinea, Australia, Fiji, Bali, and Java in the first group; Burma, Bangkok, India, and a Mexican village in the second. The last group contains a section with many pictures of Jews and Arabs in Israel, but also photographs from many other places in a variety of juxtapositions.

In every instance the point is not to discover the obvious fact that there are similarities but to bring out what is distinctive and unique. It has been said *ad nauseam* and usually at great length that photography reduces everything to what Martin Buber called "the It," meaning, "an object of experience and use." Most of the images in *What is Man?* are meant to reveal the "You" that addresses me and you.

47

A philosopher who creates images—is this not a contradiction in terms according to Plato? He distinguished four levels of reality. Images he relegated to the lowest level; the objects of sense experience, including bodies and faces, to the second lowest; and he bade philosophers turn their backs on both. They were supposed to study mathematics to prepare them for the highest level, the Forms or Ideas, by which Plato meant something like universals, notably such Forms as that of justice and the good. Of course, Plato himself felt free to create myths about matters of which knowledge in the most exact sense was not available. But what is more important, though philosophers have generally failed to note this, is that Plato evinced incomparably less feeling for the sufferings of the oppressed and afflicted than did the tragic poets who had no place in his ideal city. In a sense, Sophocles and Euripides, who died when Plato was over twenty, created mere images; yet they do not seem to have considered any human being a mere "It," while Plato and Aristotle seem to have had little or no feeling for the humanity of non-Greeks or slaves.

The notion that photography turns everything into objects, alienates man from his world, and dehumanizes men is as untenable as any suggestion that the great tragic poets of Greece were less humane than Plato and Aristotle. They were more humane.

The Mosaic bias against visual images was prompted by idolatry and is clearly irrelevant to serious photography. Yet it is interesting to relate photography specifically to Western attitudes towards idols. Consider a quotation from *The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times* by the Reverend M. A. Sherring, M.A., LL.B., who was, according to the title page, a "Missionary of the London Missionary Society":

. . . as a man can hardly be better than his religion, the nature of the Hindu partakes of the supposed nature of the gods whom he worships. And what is that nature? . . . it is, in many instances, vile and abominable to the last degree; so that the poor idolater, when brought completely under its influence, is most deplorably debased. Virtue, truth, holiness, civilization, enlightenment, human progress, all that contributes to individual happiness and to a nation's prosperity, cannot be properly appreciated by him. His soul's best affections are blighted, and his conscience is deeply perverted. Idolatry is a word denoting all that is wicked in imagination and impure in practice. These remarks are especially true of rigid and thorough Hindus . . . Their idol-worship has plunged them into immoralities of the grossest forms, has robbed them of truth, has filled their minds with deceit, has vitiated their holy aspirations, has greatly enfeebled every sentiment of virtue, has corrupted the common feelings of humanity within them, has disfigured and well-nigh destroyed the true notion of God which all men in some shape are believed to possess, has degraded them to the lowest depths, and has rendered them unfit alike for this world and for the next. (p. 45f.)

The vituperation continues, but there is no need to quote more. The people described here are those seen in the color plates of *Life at the Limits*. Is it the photographer who reduces them to mere objects?

From these sentiments of a Christian missionary in 1868 we pass on to *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* by Vincent A. Smith, published by the Clarendon Press in 1911. On page 2, the author cites Sir George Birdwood's comment on a photograph of "The Java Buddha":

. . . nothing more than an uninspired brazen image, vacuously squinting down its nose to its thumbs, knees, and toes. A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionate purity and serenity of soul.

Not having seen the photograph, we cannot say whether it deserves some of the blame for Sir George Birdwood's curious obtuseness. Since the photograph was "exhibited at the Royal Society of Arts as a favourable specimen of Indian religious fine art," and Sir George objected to its "senseless similitude" and "immemorial fixed pose," it seems likely that his arrogance owed something to the parochialism he shared with the Reverend M. A. Sherring. Still, there may be no better way to transcend such attitudes than to contemplate a number of photographs of a Java Buddha. Those in *Time Is an Artist*, on the last pages of the second color section, are not meant to serve precisely this aim—they are presented to show something about patina and restoration—and yet they may show how photography can reveal the "You."

On page 3, Vincent A. Smith quotes a fine passage from Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections*. Written in 1821, it is as pertinent as ever:

It used to happen and still happens to me that a work of art displeases me when I first see it because I am not up to it. But if I sense that it has some merit, I try to get at it, and then there is no lack of the most delightful discoveries: I become aware of new qualities in the objects and of new capacities in myself.*

Yet Smith speaks, a mere three pages later, of "the frequent introduction into Hindu art of monstrous and impossible forms, often grotesque and not rarely hideous," and finds some statues "grievously marred as works of art by the hideous extra arm." Calling sculptures of this kind "art," he says, "would justify the description of crude woodcuts in old Bibles as works of art." Much later, on page 252, he says of a celebrated bronze:

If it could be freed from the horrible deformity of the extra arms, it might receive almost unqualified praise, but the monstrosity of the second left arm drawn across the breast, and calling for the surgeon's amputating knife to remove the diseased growth, spoils an otherwise elegant and admirable work.

* *Sämtliche Werke, Propyläen-Ausgabe*, Vol. 35, p. 109 (my own translation).

One might suppose that it was Picasso who liberated us from this particular form of parochialism—until one looks at Hindu and Buddhist bronzes that actually have extremely little in common with Picasso's paintings. The second plate in the second color section of *Time Is an Artist* shows a Buddhist bronze of Aavalokiteshwara with four arms and is as perfectly poised and balanced, as beautiful and free from any sense of distortion as a winged angel in an "Annunciation" painted by Simone Martini or Fra Angelico or, for that matter, the "Victory of Samothrace," which is one of the glories of the Louvre. If it never occurred to Smith that these works might call for surgery or could be improved by painting over the wings, it is surely because his taste was formed by the "Victory" and by angels, while he discovered Hindu and Buddhist art late in life. Again, the point in *Time Is an Artist* is to show the beauty of the patina, but many people find it easier to discover the distinctive grace of a sculpture in a photograph than when they are confronted with the work itself. The main reason for this curious fact is that a photograph is a way of saying: Look at it this way, from this angle!

Taste was discussed earlier, in section 6. "Asked why one prefers this or that, one does not have to say: I simply like this better. One can try to show what one admires in the writers or artists, philosophers or composers whom one considers superior." In the case of a sculpture, one can say: Look at it from here! But the most efficient way of getting others to see a sculpture from a particular angle is to show them a photograph.

The torso of the Venus of Cyrene, the first image in the last color section of *Time Is an Artist*, is a case in point in two ways. The question whether the recovery of the missing head and arms—the opposite of an amputation—would improve the work is discussed in section 33 of *Time Is an Artist*, where I explain with the help of other pictures why I feel grateful that the Venus is a torso. But my photograph is somewhat different from other illustrations of this famous statue. Some of them emphasize the naturalism of this sculpture or what some art historians have called the illusionism of some works of the Hellenistic period. In *The Art of Sculpture*, Herbert Read offers two photographs of this Venus, one of them a straight frontal view, the other one taken somewhat from the left and cropped well above the knees so that it rivets our attention on the Mons Veneris and the breasts, and strong shadows coupled with a slight lack of sharpness combine to suggest that this could almost be a photograph of a live nude. In the text we are told, that "Aphrodite is, after all, the goddess of fertility." On the basis of Read's two illustrations, I simply could not explain to anyone why I consider this statue a supreme work of art and not merely a triumph of technique. What I admire is the upward thrust, a dynamic, rhythmic quality that is not equally evident from all angles and in every kind of light. But it is really there and not just fancied, and it does not depend on any exceptional illumination. I have seen it on every visit—and here it is in a photograph taken as the sun shone into the room.

This photograph is an image of an image, "lower" even than Plato's fourth level of reality. But the sculpture, being a torso, is not really a semblance of a woman, and my photograph is not an invitation to see it as almost real, almost alive. Nor do the photographs in *Man's Lot* compete with the realities they portray. This particular picture is an invitation to see this sculpture as well as other torsos and sculptures better. In other cases, the sunset I photographed is gone, the street scene will never be the same, the faces have changed or belong to persons now dead. But there are other sunsets, street scenes, and faces, and having seen the photographs one may see them differently. One may perceive beauty where one did not see it before; but the reorientation, when it does occur, need not be in a solely aesthetic direction. It could lead to a different perception of time and of humanity.

What is man? Most men have eyes but see not, and ears but hear not. Yet it is not their fated lot to be blind and deaf. They can be awakened, and to contribute to that aim is the task of *Man's Lot*.

I am not presuming that I am awake while you are not. Others have opened my eyes to many things, and these pages are full of quotations that show this. Nor is it a matter of seeing all or nothing. None of us has seen everything, none sees nothing. But I have seen some things that you have not seen, and I would like to share them with you because they have added to my understanding of man's lot.

EPILOGUE: DEATH AND SURVIVAL

48

After so many exposures, views, and images, let us descend into the depths of one aspect of man's lot that fuses our three central themes: life at the limits, irrevocable time, and the question, What is man? It is really not just one aspect of our lot, but its heartbeat, although much of the time we are, of course, unaware of our heartbeat: death and survival.

We are far from having ignored death in these pages. But while many photographs, poems, and paragraphs in each of the three parts of this trilogy deal with it, it could be said that survival and eventual death are really what being human *is*. To be sure, as we noted earlier, flowers also survive for a while and then die. Humanity does not consist in the fact of survival and eventual death, but reveals itself in *how* we survive and die. Unlike flowers, leaves, and grass, we experience death first and survival afterwards, and for us survival represents a choice. What is man? An animal that can choose to survive—for a while.

I

I cannot walk
you say and fall
asleep.

To speak
to wake
you lack
the strength
as I did when
you carried me.

To carry you
as tenderly
back to that nothing
whence we came
I lack
the strength.

You go alone
I fall
behind.

II

You try to raise your weary wrist
to see the time
as if it were your friend.

Time is the stake to which you're tied.
If you'd let go
you'd drift away.
You hear but have no bridge to us.

I should not leave
but touch and talk while you can hear.
How can I sit
until the end?

Too weak to clench your teeth to food
you still might bless a hand that dashed
your little life
against the rocks.

III

Your head
the eyes and cheeks
that taught me love
the mouth from which
I learned to speak
and kiss

your head
leans to one side
as if you were
a dressed-up mummy
in a catacomb.

I kiss
and straighten it
and read to you
a diary your father wrote
for you
pretending to be you
when you were small.

IV

Your little life
ebbs inside me
your solitude
grows in my belly.

V

It has been almost ten months now
Your death is overdue
Oh be delivered soon!

VI

Stop pounding
heartless heart
she earned her rest
don't wake her up.

Your breath goes hard
 devoted nurses
 guess at words
 like mothers
 hoping their infant speaks.

VIII

I hold your hand.
 Do you still know
 that it is mine?
 You clutch it like a baby
 feel
 that you are not alone.

You heard me still
 when I first came
 drenched by the rain.
 Your voice and hand
 warmed to my love.

The nurses say
 you always ask for me.
 But when did I
 last hear my name from you?
 No cause for grief
 you loved me while you could
 and yet

IX

Twice
 in those months
 you looked like death
 not like yourself.

Now
 you are dead
 but seem unchanged.

The doctor came
 and pulled the sheet over your face
 I pulled it back
 to sit with you
 and look and look.

And when they took you
 Achilles might have killed the boors
 that dared to touch you.

X

Now you have peace.
 But when I am alone
 the tears fall on my desk.
 I am alone.

Had I let go like this
 the days I sat with you
 could my grief then
 have cracked your mask
 and reached your soul?

Too late
 too late
 for everything.
 I failed
 in all
 that mattered most:

You're dead
 and when you could not die
 I let you live.

XI

Condemned
 before the dawn
 to live
 and live again
 your final hours.

XII

The roses in the garden
 that I would take to you
 still bloom.
 Why don't they stop?

XIII

I carry
 "How *are* you?"
 your ashes
 "Nice *day*."

You wanted them
 in the distant hills
 on my father's grave.

They came through the mail
 like a Godfather's threat.
 I walk to the bank
 to store them a while.

I carry
 your ashes
 "I hope
 you are fine."

XIV

My grief would ease
 if poems were
 the tombstone of a feeling.

You have no grave
 I carry
 your ashes.

To wet once more
 your helpless lips
 I could not wish.

My grief is not
 oh shame! for you
 you whom I nursed

you lived so long
 and earned
 your peace.

No word of love?
 Your feeling ebbed
 you had no pain.

Why do I grieve?

XVI

"I want her
 to remember me
 the way I was."

XV

Not what you felt
 or did not feel
 and not your face

a shock to some
 I loved it
 till they took you

oh shame! not you
 my failure
 haunts me.

Strangers
 we sometimes
 help

not those
 whom we love
 most.

XVII

"I was not beautiful
 my sister was."

You *were*
 unknown to you

but only age and death
 wrung verse from me.

"No one I love to read
 like you."

Of you I write
 what should *not* be remembered.

XVIII

"The way I was."
 You did not want a cane

nor any helping hand.
 You lived alone.

You worked when old
 and gave and gave

at over eighty visited
 the sick and old.

Your weakness
 was not you.

My father died
 before he knew it.

For such a death
 one is prepared.

Yours was so unlike you
 it seems *my* failure.

XIX

Going on ninety
 you still ran
 and laughed at her
 "Run, Mutti, run!"

Before she came
 the last time

almost six:
 "I want to give . . ."

And then while she was there:
 "I cannot walk."

XX

Stop grieving
 stubborn heart
 wake up.

XXI

The ten months nightmare
led me to forget
your need to help.
"I'd rather do it
than ask someone else."
And when we wished to help
"No, I can do it."
I asked you to say "thank you"
to the nurses
and only now I understand
you felt not gratitude but anger
oh, not at us
but at your helpless state.
The more we did
the more you hated it.
Our love no longer gave you joy.

XXII

You wanted me to come
and care
for everything
but worried lest
it be too much for me.
"Now I am wholly
in your hands."
Oh, if it had to be
of course in mine
but it was bitter
and when you complained
it was to me.

XXIII

What you felt
about me
you told me on our walks
no need to tell me what I knew
when it was hard to talk.
"You are the only one
for whom she asks."
So many heard
what they most wished to hear.
Now I believe it
but no need
to make a song
of mother love
It did take verse
to exorcize
the nightmare of these months.

XXIV

When I arrived:
"We have to work."
I felt like *being* with you first
and writing things without advice
a little later.
You were in charge.
To walk you to your livingroom
was work.
You never pleaded
never lost
your blessed pride.
Your spine kept you from second childhood.

XXV

Boxes of letters
and old photographs.
Less than three hours' sleep.
I sorted
and forgot
the nightmare
and all sleep
I was with you
the way you were
not were but *are*
in words and pictures
and in me.
Oh, time was cruel
but not you.
You saved us misery
by being as you were.

XXVI

You did not rage nor cry nor fade
as passive as a rose.
Your mind and pride
remained undimmed.
The fire that kindled me
died only when you died.

XXVII

I carry
my failure

Stop pounding
your head
against the rocks
to exorcize
the sick and old
and yet

I carry
your blessed pride
I fall
against the rocks
but seem unchanged

You have no grave

I carry
what should not be remembered
but not you

My failure
grows in my belly

Too late
I want to give
your need to help
and care

and live again.

XXVIII

Your death was like an earthquake
that set free
the hidden fires of my soul.

Three hours' sleep
is more now than I need.
The rest is writing.

XXIX

Your face looked as it always did.
Why did it move me so?
It was a dream.

XXX

Our love
of over fifty years
was lightning in the night.

Struck
I am burning till
I too am ashes.

XXXI

There are gray people who
when writing
spread their wings
revealing startling colors.

Others look bright
until they write.

And letters of condolence are like slums
not all depressing
and a few
give no idea of the rest.

So glad to hear from you!
What else is new?

A very few
know how one feels and care.
The best bring back to life
facts buried under grief.

The shadows of encroaching night
had blotted out my, like your, sight.

Once in your ninety years
you used a lipstick
and you lied.

You told me you would do it.
I could not picture it
but you did pass for ten years younger.

In London you had worked for seven years
all through the Blitz
but who would hire you at sixty in New York?

And then you worked twice seven years
as long as Jacob served for his two wives
with boys they gently called disturbed.

You learned new words
that nobody is taught in school
and you grew younger.

My lawyer father found no work
but when he died you feared
retirement would be a living death.

An hour's visit at your school
exhausted me.
You took it fourteen years
and thrived on being loved.

XXXIII

Your mother's father tapped the window with his fingers
and sometimes said not knowing that you heard him
Courage, Louis, courage!

He thought
adoring you
he had provided for your life.

Your little brother asked why all times were exciting
and only ours empty.
The Russians shot him off his horse in World War I.

Your father earned his wealth
but died without illusions
before you left Berlin.

Who could imagine Louis or your father in your school
hearing those boys or even just your stories?
Your mother there seems like an evil joke.

You had their elegance and pride but more than that
more than they knew
you did them proud.

XXXIV

Your parents died
and you outlived
two brothers and a sister

Survival
makes us fit
to understand the grief of others.

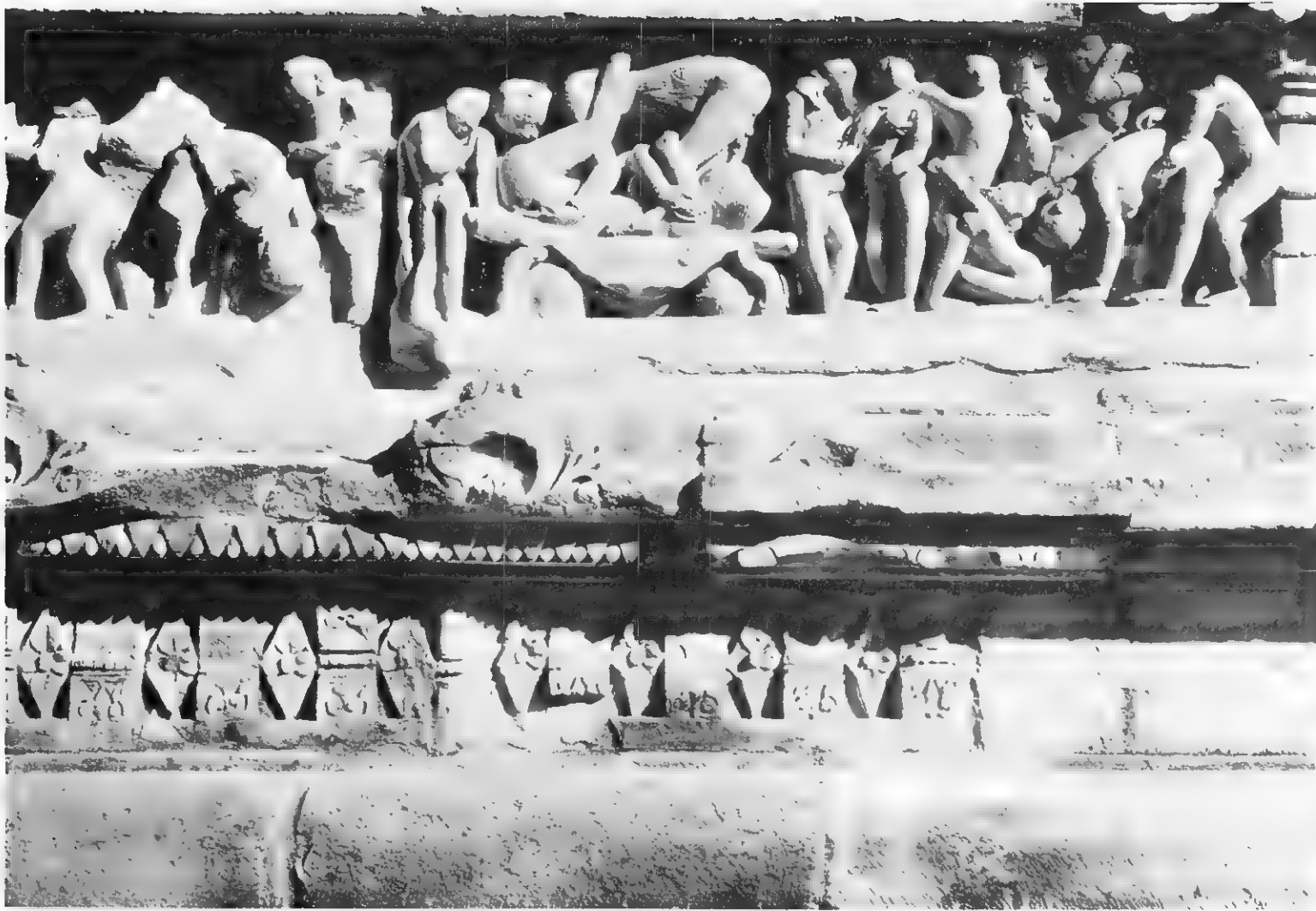
Stop pounding.
She has earned her rest.
Earn yours.



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Khajuraho, India, Relief, about 1000 A.D. 1975



Getting a drink in the Old City, Jerusalem. 1938



Near Jericho.

1975



Chicago. 1939



Chicago. 1939





Waiting for Godot. 1939



San Francisco. 1939

Aborigine, Alice Springs, Australia. 1974





Aborigine, Alice Springs, Australia. 1974



Tourists watching Aboriginal women dance. Taiwan. 1971



A woman at 7 (with her parents), at 13 (with her grandfather), at 30, and at 87.









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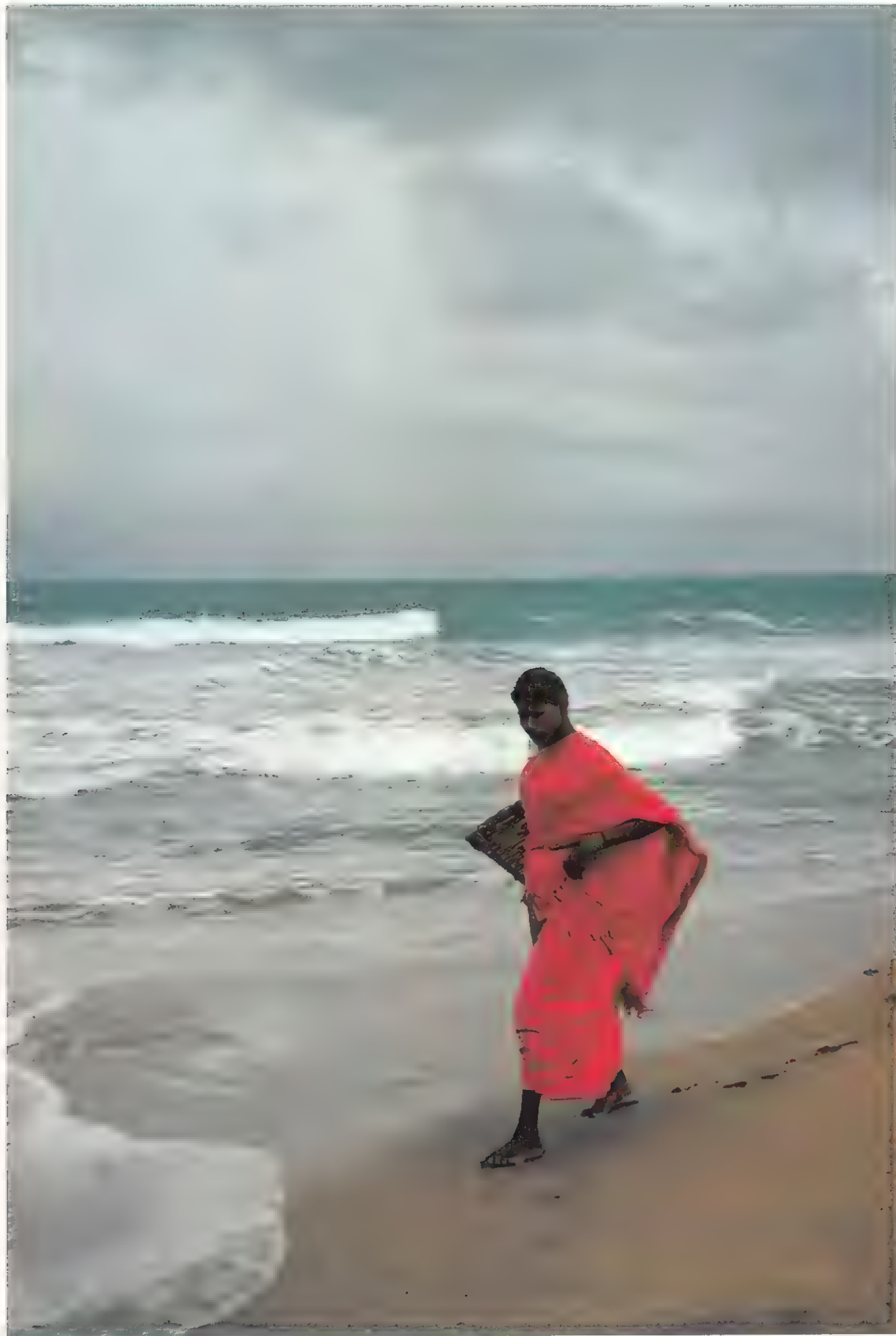
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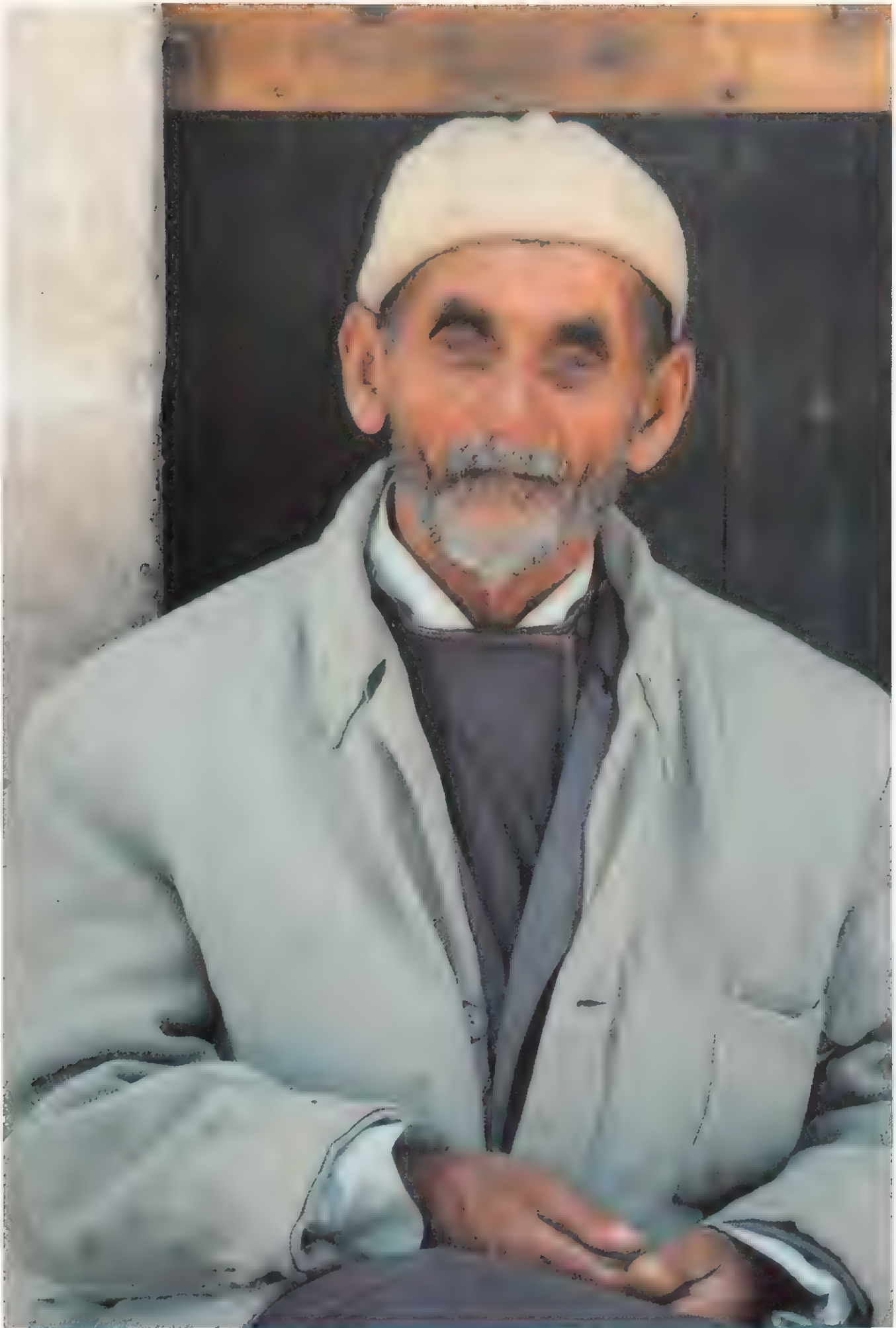


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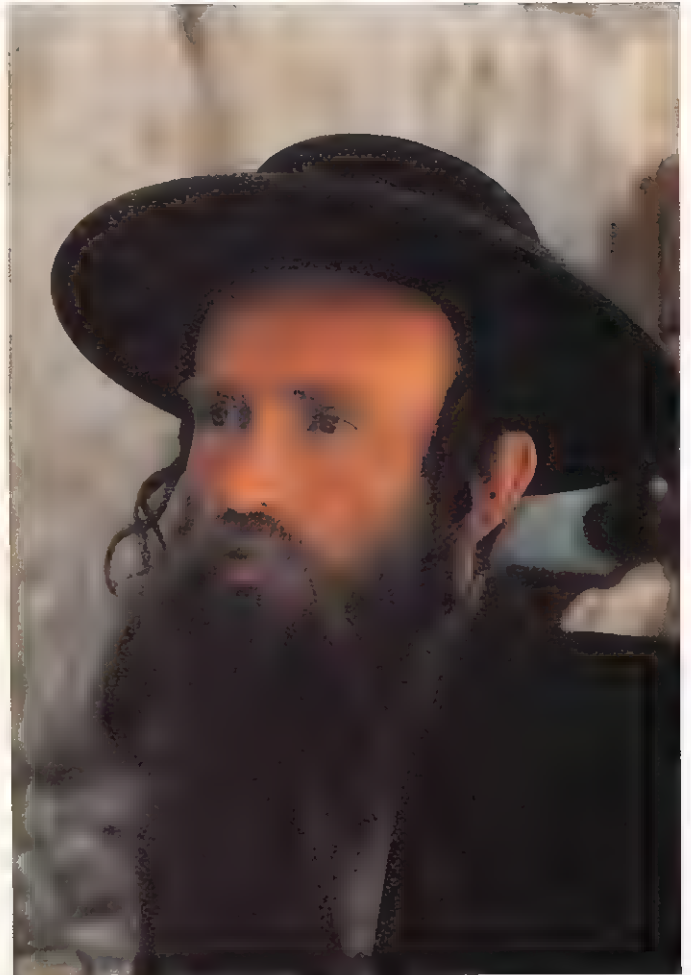


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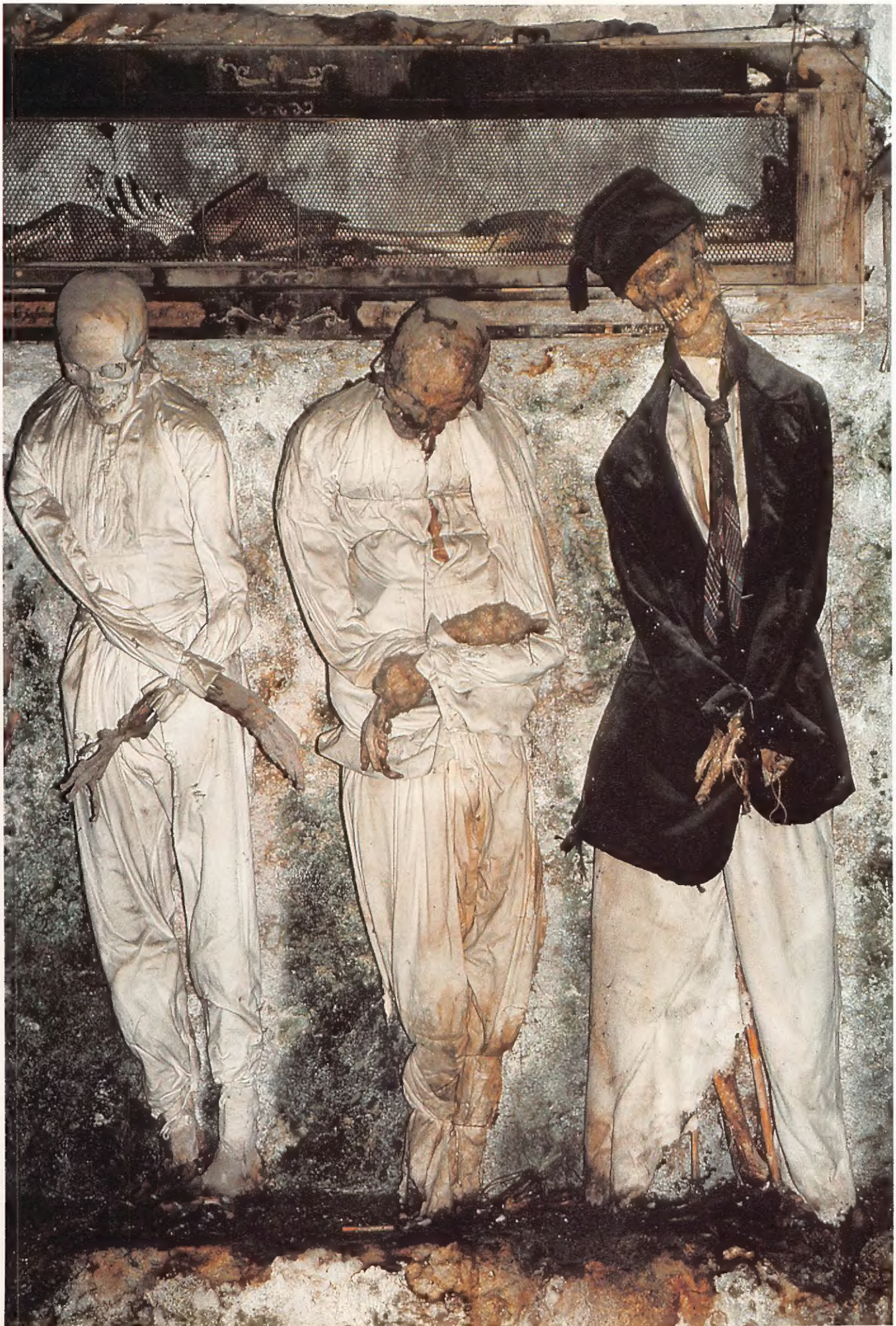


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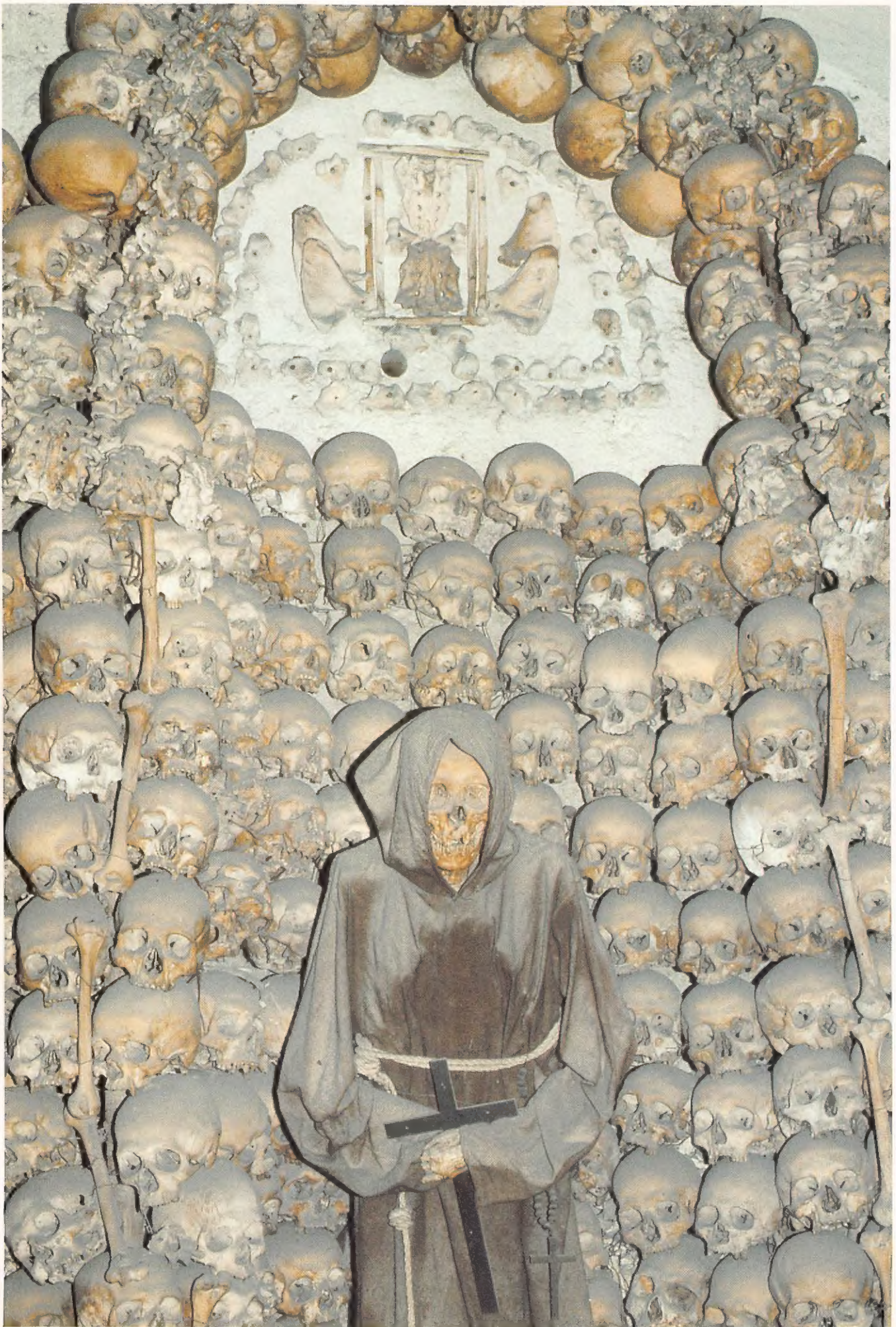


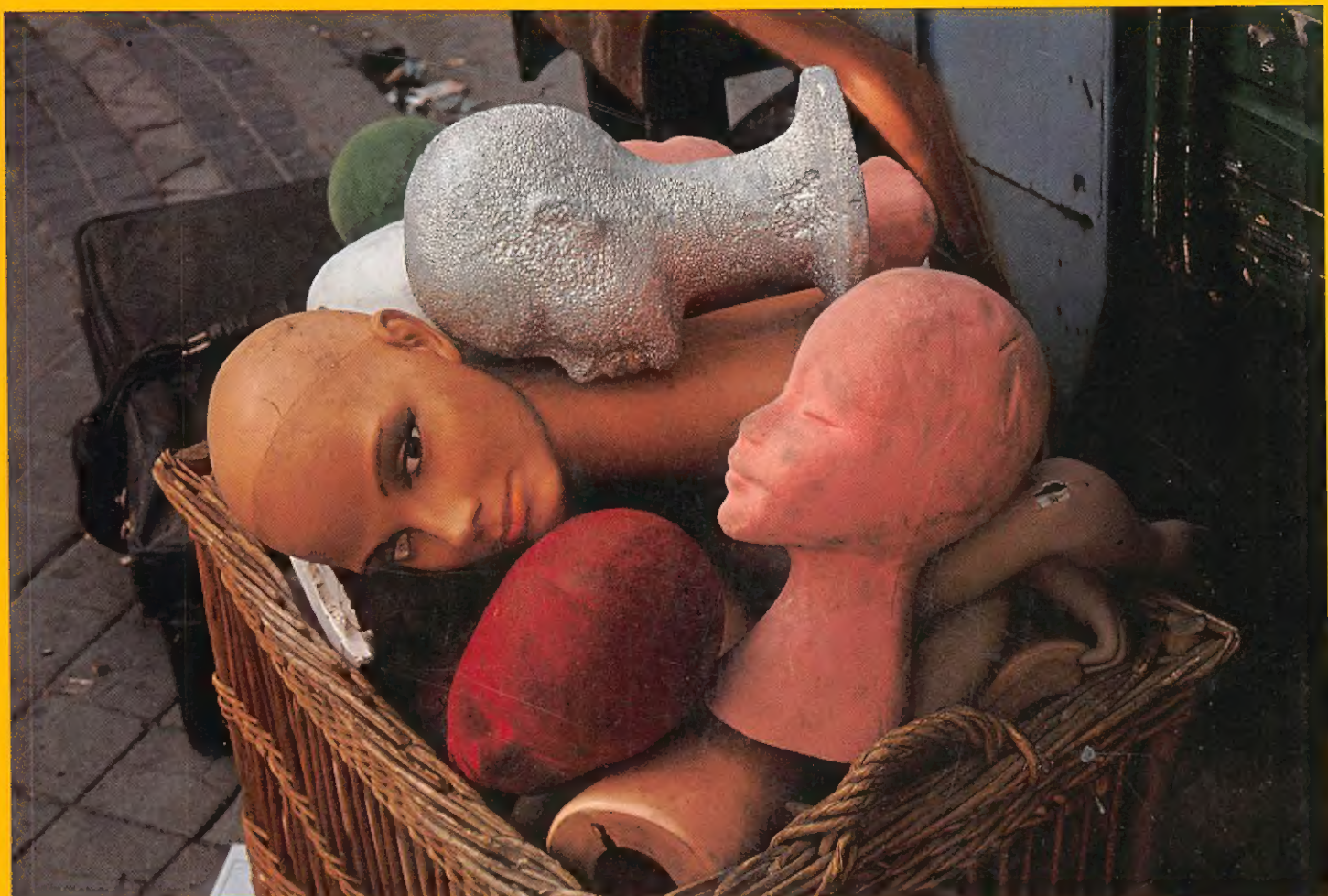


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